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CHERRYFIELD · HALL

AN EPISODE IN THE CAREER OF AN ADVENTURESS

F · H · BALFOUR

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CHERRYFIELD HALL.

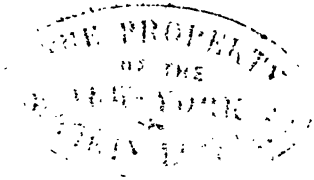
AN EPISODE IN THE CAREER OF AN ADVENTURESS

BY

FREDERIC HENRY BALFOUR

(ROSS GEORGE DERING)

AUTHOR OF "DR. MIRABEL'S THEORY," "GIRALDI," "THE UNDERGRADUATE," "LEAVES FROM MY CHINESE SCRAPBOOK," ETC.



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CHERRYFIELD HALL

PROLOGUE.

THE time was high noon; and the windows of the gray, dilapidated old church, perched on a grassy knoll nearly a mile from the slumbrous, red-roofed village, blinked and twinkled in the glare of the full sun. Around it, the green undulating landscape lay basking in a flood of golden heat; the air quivered over the surface of the ground in visible vibrations, rare to contemplate; no sound was heard save the hum of summer insects, and the occasional rustle of foliage responding to the fitful breeze. The parson had already doffed his surplice and gone home to lunch; the old sexton turned the key with a grating noise in the worm-eaten wooden door, and went shambling off without so much as a glance behind; while on the top of the path leading down to the old lych-gate stood a youth of eighteen side by side with a girl of four-and-twenty: he slim and fair, with a somewhat dazed expression on his beardless face,

she coarsely handsome, black-browed, high-coloured, with more than a suspicion of dark down upon her upper lip, showily and badly dressed.

For a moment or two neither spoke; both, indeed, seemed somewhat embarrassed at the novelty of their situation, and each waited for the other to break the spell. It was the woman who eventually came to the rescue.

"Well," she said abruptly, "that's over. 'For better for worse'—we're man and wife now, Poppy, and no mistake. Man and wife at last!"

She turned her black, handsome eyes upon him as she said this with an emphasis and meaning that had no very sedative effect on her companion. He coloured a little; then shifted his feet, and began to walk slowly and hesitatingly down the path.

"Yes, Belinda," he answered with an effort. "There's no mistake about it—man and wife. I've married you, as I always said I would."

"Not before you had to, though!" flashed back the girl, apparently irritated by his last words. "If you hadn't——"

"Come, stow that," interrupted the youth, flushing angrily. "I couldn't have done more than I have done, and you've nothing to reproach me with now. It's no use harking back upon what's past. But remember our compact. The slightest breath of all this would be enough to ruin us both—both, I tell you. It'll be difficult enough as it is, for me as well as for you. If it were known in town—you

understand what I mean—I should be turned out of doors to-morrow, and cut off with less than the proverbial shilling. So for your own sake as well as mine, just keep as quiet as you can."

"I know all that," said the girl in a less restive tone. "You needn't be afraid I shall peach. My, what a broilin' day! Here, just lay 'old of this bag, will you, while I put up my umbrella. That'll do. Only mind—you mustn't leave me in the lurch when the time comes, you know. I shall want money then—more 'n I can spare myself, for I've little enough, goodness knows. Lor, Poppy, what's the use o' lookin' glum? And you know I'm real fond of you—you know you do."

"Yes, yes,—I know you are," said the boy weakly.

"And I'll make you a good wife too, see if I don't," she continued, coming nearer to him. "People says all sorts o' bad things about girls like us, but what do I care for that? Barmaids 've got feelin's same as other folks, I s'pose, and, anyhow, I was never in anything lower than a luncheon-rooms —never! Lor, Poppy, to think of the first time I ever see you! Do you remember it? A pourin' wet day it was, you know, and all the fellers came a-crowdin' and crushin' in with their hats and coats just streamin', and there was you——"

"Drop the bar, for heaven's sake!" interrupted the bridegroom, an expression of disgust passing over his delicate white forehead. "I hate to think

of it. You won't have to stand behind a bar for ever, though, that's one comfort. It's dreadful to think of a girl who's my wife serving out sandwiches and glasses of beer to a crowd of City cads, ogling and chaffing you all the time. The idea's horrible. But you won't forget me, Belinda—you won't forget you *are* a married woman, will you, now?"

"Of course I shan't," replied Belinda shortly. "Little chance o' my forgettin' *that* in a hurry! Don't you fret yourself. They mean no harm—it's only their way o' bein' civil. Besides, *you* oughtn't to object to 'em—you're a City clerk yourself."

"Yes, confound it!" assented the other with something like a groan.

They walked on for the next few hundred yards in silence. The heat seemed to get more and more oppressive, and the bride perspired frankly. The youth addressed as Poppy was differently constituted; while she grew red, he paled: the sweltering air had no other effect on him than to increase the delicacy of his complexion and accentuate the fine edging of his lineaments. Belinda's face was now considerably *congestionné*, in the French sense; her skin was hot and puffed, and she certainly did not look her best. There is no doubt the circumstances were trying.

"Oh, it'll be all right," she exclaimed encouragingly, as she fanned herself with a rather crumpled handkerchief. "You'll get something

better before long, I dare say. I'll tell you what, though—I shan't be able to stand this heat much longer. Whew! whew! Let's make haste and get into that lane there—it's all shade, and looks as cool as cool. Ah, that's better. Why, I declare there's almost a breeze here. Oh, my goodness, I only wish we could just stay here till the sun's down! How much further is there to get to that blessed inn?"

"It won't take us more than seven minutes," replied the bridegroom, pausing to let her take breath. "We can rest here a little, if you like. You're looking cooler already." And in fact her colour had toned down considerably.

"Well, it is pleasant in this shade," she acknowledged, passing her handkerchief over her features with some vigour. "I feel ever so much cooler now; my face don't burn as it did before. But come, we can't stay here all day. I'm gettin' hungry. You've got to stand me a wedding-breakfast, you know. I feel as if I could almost eat a horse."

"You shall have the very best breakfast I can give you!" cried the youth, making a gallant effort to throw off the depression that weighed upon him. But he felt at the same time that the gaiety of his manner was too weak, too artificial, to subsist alone. It must be bolstered up, even if the support were of the coarsest order. He moved close to his wife. "Come—I haven't kissed you since the wedding."

He threw his arm round her neck, and kissed her lips and cheeks a dozen times violently. She yielded herself entirely to his onslaught, returning his kisses with ardour. Then, settling her hat, which had become somewhat disordered in the process, she said:

"How much longer did you say your holidays lasted, Poppy?"

"I've got to be back on Monday," he replied, as they strolled on again.

"And to-day's Thursday. My leave's up to-morrow," she remarked thoughtfully.

"Then you'll have to be off to-day!" he exclaimed, starting.

"The first train to-morrow morning might be soon enough," said the bride tentatively. "Perhaps you'd sooner I didn't stay here overnight? Because if so——"

Her colour rose—so did his. "It isn't that," he hesitated. "Only, of course, the fewer people know about—about our being married, the safer. I'm afraid this place is too full of gossips, that's all. Otherwise——"

"You leave it to me," interrupted Belinda. "We'll see what's best to be done when we've had something to eat. I'm famishing, I tell you, and this heat's enough to make a salamander thirsty. Whew! O lor, I feel as though I sh'd drop. There's the inn at last. Now just you run on, there's a dear feller, and see as everything's ready.

I'll be after you in no time, but I can't hurry, and there's nothing I hate more than waitin' for my victuals when I'm once set down."

Poppy, nothing loath, started off at a light swinging trot, leaving his wife to follow at her leisure. Some time before—what an age it seemed to him now!—he had fallen into the most helpless, hopeless, maudlin condition of calf-love with the woman who was now his. Of course she was handsome in her particular way: she had a superb figure, she knew how to make the best use of her eyes, she was more than usually clever at crimping, twisting, frizzling, and building-up her hair, and she always had a flattering word for everybody. His vanity was delightfully tickled when she affected a special interest in him, and he soon began to see in her a pure, sweet, beautiful woman fitted by nature to associate with princesses, but condemned by circumstances to draw beer for City clerks. From that moment he was doomed. She, sharp enough to see it, played him skilfully. She met him after City hours, and let him take her to the theatre once or twice. He, falling deeper and deeper into the morass, was like wax in her hands—and remorseless hands they were. At last she told him they were both hopelessly compromised, and that her whole future depended on his honour. He at once promised to marry her, and, as we have seen, he did so. But the half-carnal, half-romantic passion with which she had inspired him had by that time begun to subside. When the spiritual and

mental graces with which his imagination had endowed her melted into soft air upon closer acquaintance, the magnetic attraction of her voluptuous person was nevertheless strong enough to chain him to her still; but soon even this began to pall, and it needed nothing but the revelation of her claim upon him to find that he cared for her no more. Love was lost in loathing—loathing which he dared not acknowledge. His timidity, his inexperience, and his fine sense of honour, alike forbade him to desert the big barmaid who had trusted him so unreservedly. He groaned over the sacrifice exacted from him, but made it like a man.

But what, it may well be asked, can have been his up-bringing, that he should have gone so far astray and landed himself in such a desperate mess? Well, let us take a glance backward, and see what sort of a home had had the making of him. If respectability, virtue, and religious profession are all that is required for turning the raw material of childhood into the fine and durable fabric of virtuous and respectable maturity, then Poppy had no excuse. All such insidious vanities as poetry, music, cribbage, novels and the drama were not so much excluded as ignored, as though they had no existence, under Poppy's paternal roof. They did not belong to the world of Poppy's papa, for Poppy's papa did not belong to *the* world at all, excepting so far as was necessary to earn money and make a fortune. In Leadenhall Street, from ten till five or six, papa was

a sharp business man who dealt in Peruvian bark; but at Streatham (where he rented a modest villa) he was a seer, a prophet, an oracle—in other words, one of the most prominent lights of the Anglo-Israelite Association, and conspicuous for his devotion to a mysterious fetich known among initiates as "The Identity." To confess The Identity was to have one requisite, at any rate, for future welfare; to deny it was to be blinded by the god of this world, and consequently in a parlous state; to be indifferent to it was to incur—well, very serious responsibility, an account of which would have to be rendered some day. It therefore never occurred to papa that Poppy, being able to ask and hear all about The Identity every evening of his life, had anything else to wish for; while as for his sister Prissy, a prim young puss two or three years older than the boy, she was quite content, as she was wont to inform Poppy with an air of conscious superiority, to do whatever mamma "thought proper." This phrase so exasperated Poppy that he once actually threw a sofa-cushion at her head; for which outrageous conduct he was promptly sent upstairs with a stiff page of "Identity Evidence" to get by heart before tea. For, unfortunately for himself, Poppy was a boy of artistic and inquiring mind, eager to take an interest in most things—which included a considerable number of things that papa and mamma had either never heard of or didn't care about; and it was therefore a little damping to

his childish ardour when, hazarding some remark or innocent question about something he had learned at school or heard mentioned outside, he was met with blank, vacant, unresponsive looks, and a chilling "I don't know what you mean, child," or "That's nothing to do with you, my dear," or still more deadly "That'll do, my dear—papa doesn't approve of little boys asking so many questions." The world went round, and it is to be supposed that Poppy's papa and mamma went with it; but as to taking any part in the world's *progress*—as to feeling any interest, to say nothing of participating, in the advance of science, of art, of literature, of everything that gives colour to human life and makes it rich and full—they had no more notion of it than of the fact that young people need pleasure and amusement, and that if they chose to starve their own souls they had no right to starve their children's.

"Mamma," says Poppy one evening at tea, "there's going to be a Shakespearian recital at the Assembly Rooms next week, with orchestral music, and I do *so* long to go. May I, mamma? I should enjoy it so very, *very* much!"

"A Shakespearian recital!" echoes mamma, quite taken aback. "Oh, I don't know what to say, I'm sure. What do you want to go and hear Shakespeare for? Why can't you spend a nice quiet evening with your books at home?"

"I'm tired of nice quiet evenings," says Poppy, with incipient rebellion in his voice. "Why mayn't

we ever have a little pleasure? Oh, *do* let me go, mamma. It's to be 'Macbeth,' you know, with the witches and the ghosts, and appropriate music written expressly for it. I'd give anything to go and hear it!"

"Oh, this is shocking, Poppy!" says mamma, shaking her head. "Look at Prissy now—she doesn't want to go, you see, so why should you?"

"What has that to do with me?" asks Poppy. "If she doesn't want to, she needn't; but that's no reason why I shouldn't. Besides, I dare say she would like to very much—wouldn't you, Prissy?"

"If mamma thought proper to let me," replies Miss Prim, with an air.

The provocation is doubtless great, but Poppy contents himself with grimacing at her on the sly. "I'm sure you'll let me go just this once, mamma," he continues pleadingly. "It can't do any harm, and I should be so very, very grateful!"

"Well, we must ask papa," says mamma by way of compromise. "What do you think, my dear? Here's Poppy wanting to go to a Shakespearian recital at the Assembly Rooms next week. I don't know what to say about it, I'm sure."

"Please let me go, papa," puts in Poppy on his own account.

"Nonsense, nonsense!" mutters papa, without raising his eyes from the paper he is reading. "You don't want to go to a Shakespearian recital."

"But I *do* want to go, papa," retorts Poppy

"Why should I ask to be allowed to if I didn't want?"

"Don't tease papa," says Prissy. "Don't you see he's reading?"

"Mind your own business!" bursts out Poppy in a rage.

"Mamma, *is* he to speak to me like that?" protests Prissy, whimpering.

"Silence!" roars papa. "My dear, just listen to this: 'The proofs of the identity of the English people with the Lost Ten Tribes are multiplying every year. A distinct connection has lately been traced between the Lion and Unicorn in the Royal Arms and two of the mysterious creatures described in the first chapter of Ezekiel.' You remember the passage, no doubt. 'Even unbelievers bear their testimony to The Identity. Only the other day we noticed that Lord Blatherskyte, her Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies, said that so enormous had been the increase and extension of the Anglo-Saxon race during the last hundred years, there was no doubt it would cover two-thirds of the entire globe by the year 2000. Here is a clear fulfilment of ancient prophecy, familiar to all our readers. How our Identity spreads!'"

Papa lays down the paper, and looks importantly across at mamma, who seems very much impressed indeed.

"The remarkable thing is," says papa, in order that no point whatever should be lost, "that here's

an unbeliever, a heathen man, actually pointing out, in us, a fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham in Genesis xv., verse 5. It's very remarkable—very."

"Do you understand what papa is saying?" asks mamma, whispering to Poppy.

Poppy shakes his head impatiently. "I don't care anything about it," he says defiantly. "It's nothing to me whether we're the same as those old Israelites or not. What does it matter either way?"

"My good child, you've a very great deal to learn," says papa with crushing emphasis. "When you're a little older you'll probably think more about such things, and know something of their importance."

"I'd sooner go to the Shakespearian recital and hear the music than be any number of old Israelites," mutters Poppy, sticking to his guns. "Why won't you let me, papa?"

"Because I won't have it," replies papa angrily. "I don't approve of Shakespeare; he was a low writer. There are things in Shakespeare that aren't fit for anybody to read. Besides, you're a great deal too young. Your mother and I never want to go anywhere; why should *you* want to? You must be content to be guided by us, and do what we think is best for you."

"But, papa——"

"Silence!" thunders papa. "Now let me hear no more about it. Mamma and I know what's right, and I'm not going to permit any dissipation; I don't like it, and I'm not going to have it. Come,

finish your tea, and then go and fetch me my Concordance. It's on the table in the other room."

A pause, during which Poppy sniffles rebelliously.

"Would Poppy like a piece of toast for a treat?" asks mamma, by way of soothing the boy's disappointment.

"No, I wouldn't, thank you," snaps Poppy very sharply.

"Oh, Poppy!" exclaims his sister, considerably shocked. "Well, you *are* a——"

"Why won't Poppy have some nice toast?" asks mamma wonderingly.

"I don't like having things offered me 'for a treat,'" says Poppy in great anger. "What is there in a bit of toast? A bit of toast isn't a treat. You talk to me as if I were nothing but a baby, and—and——"

And here poor Poppy broke down. That last insult was too much—it cut him to the very quick. Of course it was kindly meant; but what man or woman with the slightest imagination—by which I mean the faculty of entering into another's feelings—would have offered it? Here it was that Poppy's parents failed. They had absolutely no imagination. Not caring for amusement themselves, they were entirely incapable of realizing the naturalness and the intensity of Poppy's craving for it. Because a Shakespearian recitation had no attractions for them, they refused to let Poppy hear one; and I do not

know by what other name to call such conduct than by that of gross and unfeeling selfishness. They did not for a moment suspect themselves of being actuated by any other motive than a desire for their children's good, but in point of fact they sacrificed them to their own narrow tastes and ideals, and in everything that concerned their youthful pleasures were as blind, as unsympathetic, as unyielding, as though they had been naturally cruel. What harm could it have done the boy to grant him the modest indulgence he pleaded for? It would at any rate have made him innocently happy for at least a fortnight, and, if cheerfully and kindly conceded, would have inspired fresh feelings in him of gratitude and affection towards themselves. But they never saw it. They did not understand why their child's tastes should be different from their own, and they treated him stupidly and selfishly in consequence.

And it was this same Poppy who sat in the hot room of the village inn on the afternoon of that summer's day, gazing in silence at his wife. She had eaten heartily of boiled beef, cold chicken, currant-and-raspberry pie, and a strong cheese washed down with copious libations of bottled stout, and was now lying with flushed face fast asleep upon the sofa. Poppy had eaten scarcely anything, appearing to find more solace in his pipe than in devouring solid food. How far was his father responsible for the position he now occupied? Supposing his home had been made a happy instead

of a miserable one to him, he would probably never have left it for those dingy lodgings near the Euston Road; supposing his parents had provided him with cheerful, wholesome, natural amusements, he would probably never have sought refuge in distractions of a baser sort; supposing they had surrounded him with the society of bright, intelligent, and attractive persons of his own age and rank in life, he would probably have seen no beauty in a barmaid. But they had done none of these things, because they saw no necessity for it; and it is partly, at any rate, in consequence of their unsympathetic blindness that we find poor Poppy to-day in a village ale-house, with a bouncing City barmaid as his bride.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. PILTON'S BOARDING-HOUSE.

MISS JORKAWAY was an *adventuress.*

It must not be understood, however, from this expression that there was anything morally objectionable about Miss Jorkaway. We are all adventurers and adventuresses in a certain sense. An adventuress is not necessarily a person who trades ruthlessly upon the innocence and credulity of her fellow-creatures, who obtains situations by means of false references, or who roams through the world seeking whom she may devour, like a bird of prey in petticoats. Not at all. Miss Jorkaway, though an adventuress in two senses of the word, was by no means an abandoned person. She was an adventuress, firstly, in that she had to look out for herself, and rely upon her wits as a source of compensation for the exceedingly narrow portion of this world's goods with which fortune had endowed her; and she was an adventuress, secondly, in the sense that her natural disposition led her to regard the world as a stage on which a succession of exciting

dramas were constantly being performed for her entertainment, and was thus always on the look-out for incidents of a mysterious, extraordinary, and in a word adventurous, nature to occur. It was on these grounds, and on no others, that Miss Jorkaway might properly be considered an adventuress.

Even the least metaphysically disposed will admit that though the world, objectively considered, is but one, there are, from a subjective point of view, almost as many worlds as there are people. Every man and every woman sees and inhabits a world of his or her own; and the difference between these infinitely numerous systems can scarcely be overstated. The Pope, for example, sees and inhabits a very different world from that which exists in the philosophic consciousness of Mr. Herbert Spencer; the author of "The Pickwick Papers" would scarcely seem to have occupied the same planet as the creator of Professor Teufelsdröckh; the world of Hannah More bore not the very slightest resemblance to the world of M. Zola. Now the world as seen by Miss Jorkaway was an extremely interesting place. Its inhabitants were divided into two classes—the conspiring, and the conspired against; everywhere and at all seasons plots were hatching, undercurrents flowing, mischief at work, and secrets to be unearthed; and Miss Jorkaway derived her chief happiness in life from watching all these imaginary manœuvres in full play, and bending her own ingenuity to the construction of counter-artifices.

Nothing ever escaped the creative eye of Miss Jorkaway. Did little Miss Barbara Lewthwaite at the boarding-house (Miss Jorkaway lived in boarding-houses) help herself to marmalade one morning instead of her favourite gooseberry jam, down would go the fact in Miss Jorkaway's mental note-book. Why, it was only the other day that the young minx declared she hated marmalade; this must be looked into at once. What! the young gentleman on the opposite side of the table taking marmalade too? Evidently a preconcerted signal—it could be nothing else. And then Miss Jorkaway, having constructed the theory of a signal-code between these two utterly unconscious persons, would watch them, and peer after them, and put a recondite interpretation of her own upon every word and gesture that escaped them. If one was seen writing a letter, the plot thickened; if either slipped out into the garden, it meant an appointment, a stratagem, an ambuscade. Or did she unexpectedly come across the cook? The cook was sure to be a hard-faced woman with an enigmatical expression and shifty eyes; a woman with a dark mystery concealed somewhere about her person —no doubt whatever about *that;* a woman who probably had the boarding-house landlady at her mercy; a woman who either knew something that she would never tell, or had discovered something she certainly would tell unless she were bribed not to. Miss Jorkaway fairly revelled in mysterious cooks. Equivocal ladies'-maids and meddlesome family practitioners

had also a strong fascination for her; clergymen, generally speaking, were useful merely as make-weights and stopgaps—were little better, indeed, than supernumeraries; lawyers, of course, were indispensable, particularly if they were Scotch and happened to have long upper lips; while housekeepers, always highly valuable for plot-weaving purposes, were simply priceless if endowed with some physical or mental infirmity. Nothing, too, could be better adapted to the bent of Miss Jorkaway's mind than the manner of Miss Jorkaway's life. As we have said, she lived in boarding-houses; some people, indeed, were ill-natured enough to say that she must have been born in a boarding-house, so perfectly adjusted was she to her environment. She went from boarding-house to boarding-house in England, and from *pension* to *pension* on the Continent, with the familiarity and matter-of-courseness of an *habituée;* she knew them all, she was perfectly at home in them all, she unconsciously assumed a *quasi* proprietary air in them all, she was invariably on intimate and affectionate terms with the mistresses of them all, and she somehow discovered and remembered the names, and circumstances, and family histories of all the boarders in them all. It would not be accurate to say that she was a woman greatly beloved. In fact, among the boarders in one or two of her favourite haunts she was invariably spoken of as "the Baggage"; and it is to be feared that Miss Jorkaway *was* rather a baggage, from the standpoint

of those who became the victims of her inventive genius. It is impossible to say how old Miss Jorkaway was; all I know is that she said she was five-and-thirty. But her family was old beyond dispute, claiming as its ancestor the adventurous Baron d'Iorquois, or d'Iorquouais, who flourished in the reign of Childebert, as every well-instructed schoolboy doubtless knows.

One dingy morning, about ten o'clock, Miss Jorkaway was sitting in the dingy drawing-room of Pilton's Boarding-house, one of the very dingiest establishments in the neighbourhood of Fitzroy Square. She was in travelling-dress, and a little subdued flutter of excitement was observable among the ladies who were scattered about upon the chairs and sofas. There was Mrs. Pilton herself, a short and extremely rubicund widow lady of substantial make, with very round black eyes and a hard, professional smile, as who should say, "Behold your Pilton!"; old Miss Spicer, who was rather deaf, and took snuff, and looked sharply after the extras in her weekly bill; Mrs. Dawdleby, a grass-widow with exceedingly yellow hair, who represented fashion, and had "admirers"; Miss Hacker, who was five-and-forty if a day, and never went out alone lest she should be stared at; besides one or two others whose names are of no importance. All these ladies were watching Miss Jorkaway with unusual interest, and even unusual goodwill; every one seemed benevolently disposed towards her, and to feel the greatest

anxiety for her welfare. Now, as has already been remarked, Miss Jorkaway was not a very popular person. She was rather good-looking, to begin with; and, as we know, she had other failings, which were almost as difficult to forgive. To what, then, could be attributable the unwonted benignity of all these respectable ladies? It is Miss Spicer who will reveal the cause.

"Why, we shall scarcely know ourselves without you," said the ancient spinster, who, in a faded green merino and red woollen shawl, looked like part of the furniture. "The place won't seem the same—will it, now, Mrs. Dawdleby?"

"Indeed it won't," answered Mrs. Dawdleby; "will it, Miss Hacker?"

"I can't realize it myself at all," replied Miss Hacker; "can *you*, Mrs. Pilton? And then to take all that long journey by yourself—how you have the courage for it passes *me*. Don't you feel afraid that something might happen to you on the way?"

"I never feel afraid of anything," said Miss Jorkaway.

"Well, of course—there are some people like that, I know," returned Miss Hacker pensively. "I'm sure it must be a great blessing. And I hope you'll find yourself well off when you get to your destination. Is it a school you're going to, did you say?"

"I certainly never did say so," replied Miss Jorkaway.

"Friends in the country, I believe, isn't it?" asked Miss Spicer. "Give me the town. I'm an old woman, and houses in the country are too cold for me. What do *you* say, Mrs. Dawdleby?"

"Oh, I certainly prefer London," said that fashionable lady. "The Crystal Palace is the very furthest I'd like to be away. But of course tastes differ—don't they, Mrs. Pilton?"

Mrs. Pilton smiled spaciously on them all. "They do indeed," she said. "Of course *I* prefer the town—as is natural I should in my circumstances. If I were in the circumstances of Miss Jorkaway I might feel differently. We must always make allowance for circumstances."

The hint conveyed in these remarks roused the curiosity of the ladies. Could Miss Jorkaway have come into a fortune? Was she going to be married at last? What had happened to her? For it was known that she was not on the way to another boarding-house. Even an unnamed lady at the other end of the room, who had only joined the establishment a week before, coughed mildly, by way of insinuating the interest she, too, felt in the subject.

"And pray what's the name of the place you're going to?" inquired Miss Spicer, turning to the heroine of this mystery.

"Cherryfield," replied Miss Jorkaway.

"Cherryfield," repeated all the other ladies politely. "Oh, indeed." They were very little wiser than

they had been previously, but, still, the name was something.

"I don't think I ever heard of Cherryfield before," murmured Miss Hacker.

"I dare say not," said Miss Jorkaway. "It isn't a very celebrated place."

"And you are going to stay with friends there?" inquired Mrs. Dawdleby, with the air of an accomplished *flâneuse*.

Mrs. Pilton could contain herself no longer. She gave a meaning glance at Miss Jorkaway, who seemed perfectly indifferent, and then, with an arch, triumphant smile, uttered the thrilling words:

"Our friend Miss Jorkaway is about to stay with a County Family."

'A county family!" exclaimed Miss Spicer. "Heyday, heyday!"

"A county family!" exclaimed Miss Hacker. "Well, to think of that!"

"A county family!" exclaimed Mrs. Dawdleby. "Old friends of yours, I suppose?"

It was a great success, and Mrs. Pilton enjoyed the sensation she had made hugely. Miss Jorkaway remained entirely unmoved, and the smile that hovered upon her lips was scarcely perceptible. For a moment or two there was a really impressive pause.

"Is he a baronet?" inquired Miss Hacker at last.

"Is who a baronet?" said Miss Jorkaway.

"The coun—— I mean——"

"No, Miss Hacker, the county family is *not* a baronet," replied Miss Jorkaway. "The county family is a common or garden squire named Cherryfield, who lives at Cherryfield Hall, near the village of Cherryfield, in the main street of which I have no doubt there is a public-house known as the Cherryfield Arms. At least, if there isn't there ought to be. There is likewise a Mrs. Cherryfield and two Miss Cherryfields. And, as Mrs. Pilton has just informed you, I am now going on a visit to Cherryfield Hall."

"It's a pretty name, at any rate," observed Miss Hacker mildly. "I suppose there are a good many cherry-orchards in the neighbourhood?"

"I can't say, I'm sure," replied Miss Jorkaway. "I believe the name takes its rise from the exclamation of a remote ancestor in the time of the Black Prince, when some town or other in France was fired by the English. As the French were retreating, he looked back and cried, '*O ma chère ville!*' and was consequently known as the Chevalier de Chèreville ever afterwards. The family came to England eventually, where the name was soon corrupted to Cherryfield by the peasantry of the neighbourhood. If that story is true, the Cherryfields were originally French, like me."

This statement made a great impression upon the ladies. They felt that so interesting a legend almost made up for the present representative of the family

not being a baronet. Miss Jorkaway looked on with a slight, dry smile, taking much credit to herself for the ingenious fiction she had invented.

"Well," said old Miss Spicer at last, "I'm sure I wish you may be comfortable. It's a great thing to have grand friends. I wonder whether there's a ghost at the Hall, now. All old families ought to have a ghost."

"A ghost? Oh, horrible!" exclaimed Miss Hacker, shuddering.

"Not at all," retorted the old spinster. "A ghost is a badge of respectability. Mind you write and let us know, Miss Jorkaway. I'm always interested in ghosts."

Miss Jorkaway assented willingly enough, and promised to send them full particulars if anything of the sort did come under her notice. Her assurance that she was going away for good had aroused a strong feeling in her favour, and all the ladies evinced the most cordial interest in her future welfare. She, on her side, was glad enough to depart, for the simple reason that she had grown to despise her fellow-boarders heartily. In fact, they had got the better of her. She had been utterly unable to extract any romance or mystery out of them whatever. All her ingenuity had been wasted. Not a single plot, or scheme, or secret that she had imagined about them had come true; while the mischief she had made had been really serious, until she was looked upon as a person whom it was

dangerous to have about the place. So poor a lot were really not worth exploiting, and the pleasure which both parties felt at the approaching separation was therefore genuine, affectionate, and cordial.

She had another source of satisfaction, too. It had been in her power to play off a last small bit of revenge upon the stupid people who had disappointed her. The whole story of "going to stay with" grand friends in the country was a piece of poetic license. Her real position at Cherryfield Hall was to be that of governess to Mr. Cherryfield's younger daughter, an opening which had been secured for her by some people she had met in Switzerland a few months previously. Miss Jorkaway was a clever woman, and knew how to present herself to advantage when necessary. She had also a certain amount of education, and this she always kept in reserve for use when occasion required, the result being (in the present case) that she had obtained a really very excellent situation with a family of good standing in the country, where she looked forward to meeting with plenty of the adventures that she loved so well.

"I don't want to hurry you, dear," murmured Mrs. Pilton insinuatingly, "and you know how grieved we all are to part with you; but if you want to catch the eleven o'clock train, you know——"

"Oh, don't be too late, whatever you do!" cried all the ladies in chorus. "It's so provoking to lose a train; and really you haven't too much time—indeed you haven't."

"The cab's come, m'm," said a servant, looking in.

Then there ensued a great rustling. Adieus were exchanged again and again, and now that Miss Jorkaway was actually off the ladies almost seemed as though they wanted to retain her. They vowed once more that the place would scarcely be the same without her, and that they would all miss her dreadfully; extorted from her fresh promises to write at least once a week, and tell them all about the county family; and finally stood watching the luggage-laden cab as it whirled, and clattered, and bumped along the cheerful pavements of the Marylebone Road until it disappeared. Then they resumed their places, and a great sigh of relief went up from all of them.

"Gone at last!" ejaculated Miss Spicer, speaking in the name of the boarders generally. "Now, at any rate, we may hope for a little peace."

"I feel positively free!" exclaimed Mrs. Dawdleby. "I haven't had such a sensation for weeks. She was certainly a most dangerous person for a place like this, and I hope to mercy that we've seen the last of her."

"Yes, it's a wonderful relief," chimed in Miss Hacker. "I was always in terror lest she should compromise *me* somehow. She had a way of worming herself into one's confidence that was beyond everything; and the things she'd find out! I don't believe a letter was ever delivered to any one of us that she didn't know of. How she managed it *I*

don't know; she seemed all eyes and ears. And then her stories!"

"She was a very mischief-making woman," said Miss Spicer, shaking her head. "It was she who was at the bottom of that trouble about young What's-his-name, you remember, and the red-haired girl from Tooting. I'm an old woman, and scandal don't hurt *me;* but——"

"Oh, and that other affair," interrupted Miss Hacker eagerly, "about that dear old gentleman she said had married his kitchen-maid, you know; and how abominably she behaved to them both. No wonder they went away. If I'd been you, Mrs. Pilton, I'd have turned her out long ago. She was enough to give the place a bad name."

"She could be amusing enough when she liked," remarked Mrs. Dawdleby; "and it was always fun to watch her peering and prying around. Know about our letters indeed! I should think she *did* know about our letters. She actually used to study the handwriting on the envelopes, and once she had the impudence to hope I'd had good news from my sister! It so happens that I don't possess a sister, and told her so point-blank, with a look that would have disconcerted a basilisk. But it had no more effect on *her* than—than——"

"Our friend had an over-vivid imagination, certainly," remarked Mrs. Pilton, with her loud smile, "and a very inquiring mind. Perhaps she did take rather too much interest in other people's affairs,

But I always thought she had a kind heart. There was something very open in her manner."

"Open, eh?" snapped Miss Spicer. "Insolent, I should call it. However, we're rid of her now, and I only hope she'll suit her Cherryfields. If ever she comes back here again, I shall leave, and that I don't want to do."

"It's going to be a beautiful day," said Miss Hacker, drawing the window-curtain aside, and looking up admiringly at a yellowish-brown blurr among the clouds, like the bottom of a copper stew-pan in need of polishing. "The sun's coming out at last."

"So it is, I declare!" exclaimed Mrs. Dawdleby. "I've half a mind to go as far as Oxford Circus. I've got a little shopping to do. Will you come with me?"

"I shall be delighted," replied Miss Hacker; "I never dare to go out alone, you know, and I long for a little fresh air. Just look how the sun is shining!"

It actually was. The mud and puddles in the Marylebone Road were fairly glistening in its rays, like the scum on a stagnant pool. The next moment, almost before Mrs. Dawdleby had time to answer, it had disappeared again.

"Well, I won't be five minutes," said Mrs. Dawdleby, who was never less than three-quarters of an hour. "We must be quick, or the best of the day will be gone. You won't be long, I suppose?"

"I'm almost ready now," rejoined Miss Hacker,

rising. "Well, good-bye, Miss Spicer; we shall meet again at lunch."

Miss Spicer, remarking in parenthesis once more that she was only an old woman, drew her red woollen shawl closer over her shoulders, and took snuff; Mrs. Pilton hurried away to attend to certain domesticities which required her immediate presence; Miss Hacker and Mrs. Dawdleby withdrew to get ready for their expedition. In the meantime, Miss Jorkaway, with purposes of moment seething in her brain, and a scarcely perceptible smile upon her lips, was taking her ticket for the train that was to land her among fresh scenes, fresh people, and fresh possibilities of adventure. And, as she had already dismissed all thoughts of Pilton's Boarding-house from her mind, we shall be quite safe in following her example.

CHAPTER II.

CYNTHIA.

CHERRYFIELD HALL was a red-brick, rambling old place, standing in a park of moderate size, and surrounded for many miles in all directions with orchards and market-gardens. There was an air of sunny, old-world comfort about it that was very pleasant to contemplate; the lawns were so smooth and green, the fruit-trees so ancient yet so prolific, the cawing of the rooks so home-like and so tranquillizing, the whole aspect of the place so cheerful and old-fashioned. The country lay out of the usual tourist-track; there were no hotels within five miles —hotels, that is, as tourists understand the word— and the nearest post-town was a sober, respectable, jogtrot sort of little borough, where the inhabitants took themselves seriously, and neither knew nor cared anything about Local Option. Grievous as are the ravages inflicted upon the fair face of England by the demon builder, there still remain rural stretches here and there unsullied by blue slate and yellow brick; where scamped jerry-villas are yet unknown,

and hedgerows, copses, and great rolling meadows, golden with buttercups and shaded by spreading elms and oaks, are allowed to exist very much as God intended they should. The undisturbed natural beauty of such favoured districts would seem to have a beneficial moral influence upon those who live there. The soil gives birth to a cheerful, homely, simple race, in the same way as it produces thick cream and generous, juicy fruits. Exotics are unknown, but the violets and marigolds, the wallflowers and sweet-williams, that abound in every garden, are sweet and gay and wholesome enough for tastes that are uncontaminated. Such a place was Cherryfield, and its inhabitants were a part of it.

Now Squire Cherryfield, the owner of the Hall, was by no means a wealthy man; that is to say, his rent-roll was comparatively small. He was only rich in the sense that his expenses were moderate, and that he lived well within his income. He was a mild, elderly, rather short-sighted man, who had married late in life, and whose main interest lay in the slow and gradual accumulation of facts bearing upon the "History of Poisons from the Earliest Ages down to the Present Day"—such being the prospective title of the mighty volume which was to lift his name to the eternal summers of celebrity when his researches were complete. It was a strange hobby for the quiet, studious country gentleman to take up; and when he expatiated, as he sometimes did, upon the marvellous perfection to which the practice of secret

poisoning had been brought in Europe during the Middle Ages, and waxed mildly enthusiastic over the exquisite and consummate art whereby certain death could be inflicted by means of a fan, a flower, or a glove, a stranger might be excused for wondering whether Squire Cherryfield were not a devil born. The truth was, that a gentler and more tender-hearted human being never lived. His interest in the art of poisoning was an artistic, scientific, æsthetic interest only. No doubt he commiserated the victims of the Medicis and the Borgias as a humane Christian should; and yet he sometimes spoke as though he almost envied them their deaths, as though it had been a noble and heroic destiny to exemplify in their own persons the triumphs of such supreme and perfect skill.

The wife of our philosophic Squire was, as all wives should be, a striking contrast to her husband. As a foil to his narrow face, long nose, and pale-blue, dreamy eyes, she had rather a broad face, a short nose, and eyes that were as black as jet—eyes that were never an instant still, but for ever sparkling, and twinkling, and observing. She was a good-hearted, bustling, charitable, imprudent, impulsive creature, well-meaning as all such women are, thoughtless and indiscreet as only such women can be. Mrs. Cherryfield was twenty years younger than the Squire, and people often wondered how such an oddly-assorted couple managed to pull together; some even went so far as to say they did not pull

together, and that the Squire was the most henpecked man in Westlandshire; while others affirmed, on the contrary, that, for all his absent ways and old-world studies, he was master in his own house, and that when he once put his foot down he kept it there. Probably no one knew much about it either way. The daughters were popular enough in the neighbourhood, and were really very estimable girls as girls go. Nora, the elder of the two, was now nineteen—a handsome young woman, with a straight nose, dark hair and eyes, short upper lip, and somewhat reserved manners; Cynthia, who was a year and a half younger, having a curly head the colour of ripe corn with the sun on it, deep blue eyes, a fair skin enriched with a healthy tan, and the most mischievous disposition ever known since the days of Robin Goodfellow.

Of all these details, it must be observed, Miss Jorkaway was profoundly ignorant. Beyond the fact that there were two Miss Cherryfields, and that she was to be governess to the younger of them, she knew nothing whatever of the family, and as she approached the station that was to be her terminus, her curiosity rose to something like fever heat. She experienced feelings almost akin to those of a knight-errant of the olden days, an adventurer when on the brink of some unknown region of giants and dragons, haunted castles and enchanted woods, with possibilities of plot and counterplot, combats, intrigues, espials, conspiracies, and mysteries; great was her

eagerness for the fray, and she began to peer scrutinizingly out of the carriage-windows as the train slackened its speed in order to reconnoitre her surroundings. At last it stopped at a small, neat platform with a background of sloping flower-beds, and the word "Cherryfield" emblazoned in white flint-stones upon a bank of grass. Miss Jorkaway opened the door, gathered her traps together, and stepped out; the engine emitted a short squeak, and moved slowly on again; and the next moment she found herself confronted by a civil-looking porter, with nothing very remarkable about him, who advanced for the purpose of relieving her of some of her heavier articles.

"Are these all ye've got, m'm?" he said, as he touched his cap.

"One, two, three, four, and that leather trunk," replied Miss Jorkaway, darting a keen glance at him. "I shall want a fly, or an omnibus, or something. How far is it to Cherryfield Hall?"

"Sure ye've got nothin' else, m'm?" asked the porter mildly.

"Now what makes you think I've got anything else?" retorted Miss Jorkaway, with incipient suspicion in her voice. "Do I look like a person who can't count? No, not that trunk—the other one, with a torn label. Five o'clock, I declare! Are there any vehicles to be had here? Whereabouts is Cherryfield Hall?"

"This way, m'm," said the porter, shouldering the

trunk and contriving, in some way known only to porters, to hang all Miss Jorkaway's smaller impedimenta on to various parts of his person. "I think there's a carriage outside to meet you. Lady for the 'All, Bill," he continued, as another functionary emerged from a dingy-looking lair near the booking-office. "Trouble you for your ticket, m'm, if you please. Thank you, m'm. Out at this door, m'm. I'll see to your things bein' put in all right."

"Is that Miss Jorkaway?" exclaimed a clear, pleasant young voice, as that enterprising person came out of the station, preceded by her luggage and its carrier. "So sorry I can't get down, but Pipeclay's rather fresh this afternoon, and—— no, not that way, Tom; put the basket here, there's plenty of room in front; the trunk must go behind. What sort of journey did you have? Frightfully tedious, I expect. I can't bear railway journeys myself. Nothing more to go in, Tom? Oh, that thing—well, stuff that anywhere. Now we're ready, I think. Hold tight, Miss Jorkaway; Pipeclay generally starts off with a jerk, which is rather disconcerting if you're not used to it. He nearly jerked an old lady into the road the other day; but I don't think he does it out of mischief."

By this time Miss Jorkaway had managed to hoist herself on to the front seat of a rather high dogcart, and now took a sidelong glance of swift inquiry at the speaker. She saw a trim, neat little figure, with strong, small hands encased in yellow driving-gloves,

a pert little hat, and a pert little face, which at first sight made a favourable impression upon her; but she instantly told herself that first impressions were to be distrusted, and that she would do well not to form a judgment until later on.

"Oh, thank you so much," she replied in her very suavest tones. "This is delightful; I enjoy a drive of all things. What a pretty horse, and how capitally he trots! You are a Miss Cherryfield, I presume?"

"Yes, I am Cynthia," said the girl in her straightforward way. "I came to meet you because I wanted to see you before the others did."

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway, rather taken aback. "You wanted to see what I was like, I suppose?"

"Naturally," said Cynthia, with a frank laugh. "You're going to be *my* governess, you know, not papa's or Nora's. You've never seen papa, have you?"

"I've never seen any of you," replied Miss Jorkaway.

"Well, I hope you'll like us," rejoined Cynthia, tightening her hold upon the reins. "Quiet, Pipeclay! There's no need to get excited, my pretty. Hasn't it been a jolly day? I don't know whether you like the country; for my part, I couldn't live anywhere else. Some people find it dull, I believe. By the way, I hope you're not very learned, are you?"

"I won't be more learned than I can help, if you don't want me to," was the diplomatic answer of Miss Jorkaway.

"Why, you're a perfect dear!" cried Cynthia enthusiastically. "We shall get on capitally together, depend upon it. I can't bear learned people; they make me feel so small. Papa's awfully learned, you know—not a bit like an ordinary country squire. Mamma's the real squire—she and I together. Papa says the squireship is put into commission, and mamma and I perform the duties of it in his name."

"So that's how the land lies," thought Miss Jorkaway, pricking up her ears. "I must get a few more hints about these people." Then aloud: "You and your mamma are the practical ones of the family, I suppose, who look after the house, dispense the charities, and all that sort of thing?"

"I practical!" exclaimed Cynthia, evidently much amused. "Well, nobody ever accused me of *that* virtue before. No, Nora's the practical one. She's as sensible as they make 'em, an epitome of all the virtues that ever existed in or out of a copybook. People usually consider me rather empty-headed, I believe, and that's why I've got to have a governess. All I'm good for is to keep things lively. I like bustling about and bossing around generally; I don't go in for method and principle and views of life. That's Nora's department, and I wouldn't encroach upon it for worlds."

A pause, during which Miss Jorkaway produced

an imaginary photograph of Nora in her mind's eye. A prim and priggish young person who possibly wore glasses and marked out courses of reading for herself, thought Miss Jorkaway. A young person with ideas, who would no doubt take stock of the new governess, and see if she was up to her own standard of moral principles. "I must be on my guard with Nora," she said to herself. "This girl's delightful, but the other——"

"See that old mill?" said Cynthia, interrupting Miss Jorkaway's train of thought. Miss Jorkaway looked in the direction of Cynthia's whip, and saw a black, weird-looking old ruin of a windmill with dilapidated sails, standing out grim, and almost ghostly, against the sky. "That's the only mill in the country for miles round," continued Cynthia, "and it's haunted. There was a wicked old miller there once upon a time who used to starve poor people, I believe, by refusing to do something or other that he ought to have done—I don't quite know what—and now they say he's to be seen at dead of night going up the rickety old steps with a great sack on his shoulder full of bones. His name was Jeremiah Cluff, and there's a rhyme about him, only I can't remember it. Somebody is supposed to have screwed up courage once to go there at midnight and ask him what he had in his sack, and he replied, quite impromptu:

"'The bones of millers that are dead,
To grind, and grind, and grind for bread,
As millers grind the poor.'

He must have been a poetical miller, although he did misconduct himself so when he was alive. I'm awfully fond of ghosts—in the daytime, you understand. I don't care about them so much at night, somehow."

"I suppose there isn't one at the Hall?" inquired Miss Jorkaway.

"I'm thankful to say there's not," replied Cynthia. "Ghosts are all very well in their way, but in domestic life they're decidedly out of place. There, isn't this a pretty bit of road? Those are cherry-orchards—over there, near those thatched cottages, I mean. Nearly all the people hereabouts are either fruit-farmers or market-gardeners. I'm awfully fond of gardening; aren't you? I just revel in flowers. We've a jolly garden, you know—that's one thing we *can* boast of—and I grow everything I can get that looks pretty and smells nice. I don't value a flower one bit the more because it's frightfully rare, and costs about a guinea a bud. That doesn't make it a shade prettier or sweeter than it is naturally. Look at the flowers in that little garden there; did you ever see a more splendid blaze of colour? Some people would say they're nothing but weeds, because they grow everywhere and cost next to nothing. I do think that is such a vulgar view to take—just as though the mere fact that a flower's plentiful made it any the less sweet and darling and delicious than it actually is! I love 'em all, and I don't care whether they cost a penny or a pound; but most of

all I love hyacinths and violets. The very scent of them almost intoxicates me, and makes me feel as though I could never, never grow old. I've banks and banks of violets in the garden. The garden's my special domain, you know. Nobody interferes with me there, not even the head-gardener. He was an awful tyrant at first—at least, he tried to be; but I soon managed to get the upper hand, and, I'm thankful to say, I've kept it ever since."

Here Cynthia paused for breath, and Miss Jorkaway, who had never cultivated a taste for flowers, found it a little difficult to make a suitable reply. She murmured something sympathetic, however, and then tried to turn the conversation into more congenial channels.

"You seem to have a very charming home," she said at last. "I suppose that, in your position, you see a good deal of society in the course of the year?"

"Well, I don't know," said Cynthia indifferently "We're not fashionable people, if you mean that. We don't go up to London in the season, for instance, and I'm glad we don't. I'm sure I should hate it. Why, here we are at the end of May; it'll be the very height of the season in a week or two, won't it? And we're not dreaming of going up. In fact, we've got some people coming to stay with us next month, so you may be sure that they're not fashionable either, else they wouldn't be here in June, you know. They'd be doing operas and parks in London. Papa

hates fashionable people, and as for me—well, I don't think I've ever known any."

This was the most interesting thing to Miss Jorkaway that Cynthia had said yet. A houseful of visitors meant any amount of possible schemes and mysteries and plots. It was a pity, perhaps, that they were not strictly fashionable, but that couldn't be helped. They were, at any rate, sure to prove much more exploitable than the Piltons and Dawdlebys she had left behind her, and her anticipations went up ten per cent. upon the spot. She immediately proceeded to draw Cynthia out still more.

"How charming that is, now!" exclaimed the ingenuous lady. "*I* hate fashionable people, too; that's one reason I'm so glad to have escaped from London. They always seem to me so frivolous and artificial. And so Mr. Cherryfield is learned, I think you said. What is his special subject?"

"Poison," replied Cynthia.

Miss Jorkaway nearly jumped out of her seat.

"Poison!" she repeated aloud. "There's something to be discovered here," she thought, in delighted excitement. "A country squire who shuts himself and his family up in a lone country house all the year round in order to dabble in poison has a secret, depend upon it. This mystery must be seen to. Nothing could be more promising."

Her communings were here once more interrupted by Cynthia, who appeared to be exceedingly amused.

"Papa is writing a history of poisons, that's all," she said, laughing. "He knows something of chemistry, and alchemy, and mediæval medicine, and has taken up this as a sort of hobby. Funny, isn't it? He doesn't hunt or shoot, you know, so it's a great blessing that he has something to occupy his mind and keep him quiet, or he'd probably be bored to death. And really you've no idea how romantic it is when you come to know something about it. Papa has collected all sorts of the most delightful stories and legends about things that happened in the Middle Ages—secret poisonings, you know, from jealousy for the most part, or through some political intrigue, or revenge for some injury that had been done a century before—you can imagine the sort of thing; and then he reads them to us. I don't believe he knows about anything else—at least, if he does he doesn't care about it. Papa's a dear; he never interferes with us in any way, and we do just what we like as far as he's concerned. Mamma's the ruling spirit in the house."

"She doesn't go in for poisons too, then?" asked Miss Jorkaway.

"Not exactly," cried Cynthia merrily. "Jams are more in her line. Oh, there's nothing romantic about mamma, any more than there is about me. She's a good deal younger than papa, you know," continued this communicative young lady, "and of course doesn't take much interest in mediæval history. It's an acquired taste. Mamma's bright

and lively; she's fond of society, and it's chiefly owing to her that we have people staying in the house every now and then. Papa doesn't mind, so long as he's not disturbed."

"Evidently a semi-attached couple," commented Miss Jorkaway to herself. "A lively woman, fond of gaiety, and no doubt young for her age, tied to an old bookworm who keeps her buried alive in the country that he may dabble in murders and witchcraft and the like—ah! One can easily imagine what to expect under such conditions as *that*." The *dramatis personæ* were arranging themselves in the mind of the new governess with satisfactory rapidity and clearness; the plot, and the parts they were each to play, would soon be unfolded to her gaze.

"We're nearly home now," resumed Cynthia after a pause. "I expect you'll be glad of some rest and a cup of tea before dinner. Pipeclay, you've come along spankingly, my sweet! That large white house you see on the hill over there belongs to the Parletts. It's a pretty place, bigger than ours. Now, as soon as we've turned this corner you'll see the Hall. There! you can just make out a bit of the left wing and that chimney-stack. Look what a spurt Pipeclay's putting on. He knows he's getting near home after he's past that bend."

Miss Jorkaway fastened her eyes eagerly upon the substantial old red-brick mansion which now loomed into view, glowing warm and crimson in the rays of the westering sun. A comfortable-looking place

indeed it was, particularly after that frowzy boarding-house near Fitzroy Square, and the scene, no doubt, of many interesting and dramatic occurrences. She did not attempt to draw Cynthia out any more, feeling content from this point to watch all forthcoming developments for herself. The road now curved slightly downward, and then turned sharply to the left, beside fields shaded by a number of spreading old trees of enormous girth. In a short time they came to an open space or green, and in five minutes more were driving under an avenue of elms up to the house itself.

The door was flung open by a respectable-looking elderly man-servant in plain clothes, who forthwith began to assist in handing Miss Jorkaway's boxes down. That lady, feeling that a crisis of no ordinary moment to her fortunes had now arrived, got down too, and followed Cynthia into a spacious entrance-hall, adorned with no small amount of fine old carving in varnished oak. Over the enormous fireplace there was a sculptured representation, in wood so dark as to seem almost black, of Perseus and Andromeda; the vaulted ceiling was panelled in the same material, a rich but faded carpet covered the floor, and the whole was lighted by narrow windows of particularly fine stained glass. The general appearance of the place struck the new governess as more than respectable—it was actually impressive. Cynthia led her rapidly across the hall, and then, drawing aside a curtain that Miss Jork-

away had not noticed before, ushered her into a room which looked half library and half boudoir.

"Mother," said the girl in her clear, ringing voice, "here's Miss Jorkaway."

The lady who rose from her chair and came promptly forward with a smile of welcome at this announcement was of pleasant countenance, and Miss Jorkaway was fain to acknowledge as much. Her black eyes twinkled in a very friendly manner, and there was a brusque heartiness in the way she shook hands and hoped the railway journey hadn't been very tedious and disagreeable that might have sent a glow to the heart of Diogenes himself. For a moment Miss Jorkaway found herself smiling blandly in return, and it was not until the first little rustle of the introduction was over, and she was sitting in a low easy-chair drinking a cup of tea, that she resumed her favourite habit of scrutiny. The thought that invariably arose in Miss Jorkaway's mind on meeting a new acquaintance was, "Are you what you seem to be, or are you something else?" and that thought arose now, as soon as she had time to contemplate her hostess.

"You've come at the very best season," said Mrs. Cherryfield, as she handed her a plate of toast. "The country's always delightful in early summer. I hope Cynthia didn't frighten you with her reckless driving. I'm always afraid that Pipeclay may be rather more than she can manage. And how was London looking when you left?"

"It was rather muddy," replied Miss Jorkaway, munching.

"Ah! it generally rains in London," said Mrs. Cherryfield. "We've been having beautiful weather here; I haven't known such a spell of sunshine I don't know when. I do hope you're fond of the country?"

Miss Jorkaway assured her that life was scarcely worth living anywhere else. "Although," she added, "of course London has intellectual and artistic attractions which——"

"Oh, no doubt," interrupted Mrs. Cherryfield. "Attractions and temptations too, of all sorts. We're quiet people here, you know. Were you very gay in town?"

Miss Jorkaway thought of the dissipations and junketings she had enjoyed at Pilton's Boarding-house, and a sardonic smile flitted over her features. "I have left nothing behind me that I regret," she replied diplomatically, and took another piece of toast.

"Ah!" rejoined Mrs. Cherryfield in a satisfied tone. "And what, now, struck you most on your drive up here from the station?"

"I think," said the new governess, "that what struck me most was the singularly observant mind of your daughter. She appears to have excellent natural gifts, which only require to be systematized, so to speak, to be drawn out and cultivated, to develop into a very exceptional character. Pardon

my frankness, but as I understand that she is to be my pupil——"

"Quite so," interrupted Mrs. Cherryfield. Cynthia had disappeared as soon as she had ushered Miss Jorkaway into the room. "Quite so; I'm delighted to hear that you think so highly of her already. I dare say it struck you as rather strange that at her age we should think she needs a governess; but the fact is that from a variety of causes her education has been rather neglected hitherto, and it occurred to us that a sort of finishing course, you know, with judiciously selected reading and intellectual companionship, would make up for past deficiencies."

"No doubt," assented Miss Jorkaway, trying to look intellectual. "You may depend upon my doing my very best with her. Thanks—no more tea. It's but seldom I drink tea in the afternoon; but really yours is so delicious, after a long journey, too, that——"

"Let me give you another cup," said Mrs. Cherryfield. "Yes, Cynthia's a good girl, but she wants a little training. I've never been able to attend to her as I ought; one has so much to do in a house like this, and my husband is far too much engrossed in his own studies to pay much attention to such matters. He's a great student, you know. I wish myself he were a little less devoted to his books; he'd be so much better if he took more exercise in the fresh air. I can't do anything with him, on

more can any of us. Are you fond of walking, may I ask?"

"Yes, I'm an excellent walker," replied Miss Jorkaway.

"Well, then, you must see what you can do with Mr. Cherryfield," continued the good lady; "and if you can manage to wean him a bit from those old dusty books of his, and take him for some good brisk walks while this fine weather lasts, I shall really be quite grateful to you."

Miss Jorkaway started and coloured up. She had scarcely been in the house a quarter of an hour, and here was the mistress of it actually throwing her own husband at her head! Now what, wondered Miss Jorkaway, could be Mrs. Cherryfield's motive? That they were a semi-attached couple she had already made up her mind; that there was something more under the Squire's passion for the history of poisons than appeared at first sight was probable, if not certain; but that his wife should openly avow her intention of throwing them together from the very outset, and insinuate that she, the new governess, would no doubt have more influence over him than even his wife and daughters, was indeed cause for the most serious reflection. Could it be that this black-eyed, full-blooded woman had a secret *penchant*, and was now scheming to give herself a fair field by engaging her husband's attention with a fascinating stranger? Was that to be her task—the fascination of Mr. Cherryfield in the interests of an intriguing

wife? Miss Jorkaway's eyes sparkled with excitement, and her brain began to work busily. The plot was thickening with a vengeance.

"Ah! here's Nora," exclaimed Mrs. Cherryfield, as the door opened.

Miss Jorkaway immediately became all eyes and ears. Nora at last—the young woman of principle, whom she recognised instinctively as her natural antagonist and foe! But Nora did not wear *pince-nez*, or go about the house with heavy books under her arm. She was a slim, graceful girl, as even the governess could see, with plenty of character in her face, it is true, but by no means the priggish-looking person that Miss Jorkaway had pictured her. She advanced and welcomed the new-comer with the most perfect courtesy and good breeding; there was, however, an unmistakable tinge of reserve and hauteur in the way she spoke and held her head, which presented a marked contrast to the frank *bonhomie* and outspokenness of Cynthia. She looked at Miss Jorkaway with a gentle, albeit searching, gaze, and the governess returned the scrutiny with interest.

"I think, mother, that perhaps Miss Jorkaway would be glad to go to her room and rest a little," said Nora, when the first greetings were over.

Miss Jorkaway immediately began to wonder whether Nora had any hidden design in making the suggestion. Perhaps she wanted to get the new governess out of the way, in order that she might say something to Mrs. Cherryfield about her behind

her back; or perhaps it was her object to see her and speak to her by herself, an excellent opportunity for doing which would naturally be afforded in that way. That Nora meant nothing more than she said never entered Miss Jorkaway's imagination, and she stood instantly upon her guard.

"Dear me, how thoughtless I am!" exclaimed Mrs. Cherryfield. "Of course she would. Will you go upstairs, Miss Jorkaway, and make yourself comfortable before dinner? There's plenty of time if you think you'd like to lie down for half an hour. Nora, my dear, just go too, won't you, and show Miss Jorkaway her room?"

If there was a plot, either Mrs. Cherryfield was in it, or had lent herself to Nora's schemes with unsuspicious readiness. So thought the shrewd Miss Jorkaway. But further than that she could not see. Nora took her upstairs, talking in a matter-of-fact way every now and then, introduced her to her bedroom, and then left her to her own devices. Nothing could have been more perfectly indifferent than Nora's bearing towards her. She was ordinarily courteous, and nothing more; ever so slightly cold; it almost seemed—preposterous as the supposition doubtless was—as though she took no special interest in Miss Jorkaway at all! But that, of course, was impossible; and Nora's *insouciance* simply showed what a very deep young person Nora must really be.

"I knew I should have to be on my guard against her," said Miss Jorkaway to herself, with a self-

satisfied nod. "Scheme as much as you like, my young lady, and we'll soon see which has the better headpiece of the two."

Meanwhile the unconscious subject of these reflections, after seeing that her guest was comfortable, went straight to her own room in order to finish some writing. Miss Jorkaway at once took stock of her new quarters. To begin with, the bedroom in which she found herself was large, airy, and well furnished. There was a charming view of the fertile, smiling, richly-cultivated country from the windows, a good fireplace, a couple of easy-chairs, a bright, funny wall-paper—representing a parrot, a poppy, and a shepherdess in unending progression—a round table, and a bed with one of the most delightful spring-mattresses she had ever felt. There was an old-fashioned air about it, too, which was extremely pleasant; two or three cupboards, which were so arranged as not to be noticeable at first, and which Miss Jorkaway pounced upon with the eagerness of a detective; but, alas! they were only cupboards, after all—they did not lead to any secret chambers or staircases that she could discover, nor was there a sliding panel anywhere. This, of course, was disappointing, but Miss Jorkaway, who knew when she was well off, sensibly determined to make the best of things, and congratulated herself upon the solid comforts of her surroundings. Then she dived into her pocket, produced a bunch of keys, and began to open her boxes. Out came her dresses,

one after another—two for evening wear, a red merino for the afternoon, two or three showy, but rather unsubstantial, costumes for hot weather, and a bonnet, which had got a little crushed. All these were patted and unfolded and shaken out and carefully examined before being hung upon the hooks in the spacious cupboards; and then another box was opened, and more secrets of the female toilet exposed to the light of day. For some time Miss Jorkaway continued very busy. *She* didn't want to lie down for half an hour before dinner—not she. Never had she felt more thoroughly awake than she did then. Mrs. Cherryfield's tea had dispelled every symptom of fatigue, and Miss Jorkaway worked with a will at the agreeable task of unpacking.

She was kneeling over an open trunk, with her face toward the door. To her left were two windows; opposite these was the fireplace; behind her was the wall with its inconsequent procession of parrot and poppy and shepherdess, parrot and poppy and shepherdess, interrupted only by a washing-stand and a chest of drawers standing a few feet apart. Suddenly she heard a stealthy noise. It ceased, and she fancied for a moment that she must have been mistaken. She listened, however, with all her ears; and then she heard it again. Down went the lid of the trunk, and up jumped Miss Jorkaway. The wall at the back had opened, and, peering in through the dark passage beyond, she saw the face of a woman.

CHAPTER III.

MISS JORKAWAY'S FIRST ADVENTURE.

"WHO in the world are you?" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway breathlessly, as she sat down, bolt upright on the lid of her trunk.

Instead of replying, the mysterious intruder moved slowly forward, keeping her eyes fixed steadfastly upon Miss Jorkaway. Then the dark opening disappeared, and the wall resumed its usual appearance. The woman, now well in sight, looked some age over sixty. She had high cheek-bones, a wide mouth, small gray eyes, and the most hopeless, sour, discontented expression ever seen on a human face. Her dress was neat and appropriate—that, apparently, of a respectable upper servant; but her stealthy movements, and the eager and suspicious gaze that she directed towards Miss Jorkaway, went far to justify that imaginative person in the distrust and perplexity she felt. For a moment the two women stared at each other in silence. At last the elder said:

"My name is Virtue Sexton. I came to see whether I could do anything for you."

"You're very good, I'm sure," replied Miss Jorkaway, recovering herself; "but, really, the way you came in was enough to startle anyone. How in the world did you manage to get through that wall?"

"There's a door," answered Virtue Sexton, in a depressed voice. "It's papered over like the wall, so maybe you didn't notice it. Do you want me to help you with your clothes?"

"Certainly not, thanks," said Miss Jorkaway hastily. "Of course, it's very good of you, but there's nothing I can't manage myself. Are you the housekeeper, may I ask?"

"Housekeeper indeed!" muttered the strange woman, with a bitter smile. "No, ma'am; I am not the housekeeper. I'm nobody in particular. Never mind what I am. Perhaps I don't rightly know myself. You're the new governess, I'm told?"

"I am," replied Miss Jorkaway, now more mystified than ever.

"Let me look at ye," said Virtue Sexton, in her dolorous tones. "A sharp face—the world has left some of its lines upon you, anyone can see. P'raps you've had trouble, and been obliged to fight your way, like other folks. Ah, it's a hard master, is the world, and gives bad wages to its servants."

"She is certainly mad," thought Miss Jorkaway with a furtive glance at the door. Then, aloud: "I really don't understand what you mean by addressing such remarks to me. I can't suppose you mean to

be rude, but your conduct is most extraordinary. Be good enough to tell me in a few words what it is you want, and then leave me to finish my unpacking."

Virtue Sexton did not seem in the least put out by this rebuke. She rested her hand against one side of her face, heaved a deep sigh, and looked at Miss Jorkaway more sourly than ever.

"I dare say you think you're going to have fine times here," she continued, "and I won't say you're wrong. The mistress is a good-natured woman, and the master means well—oh, he means well! like many other folks in this world. You'll have your own way in most things, I dare swear. But remember this—there's an account to be given of it afterwards."

"Are you presuming to threaten me, woman?" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway, in an indignant burst.

"Don't speak so loud," was Virtue Sexton's answer. "You're a lively sort o' person, I can see, though not so young as you were once, and the world's got its hold upon you pretty strong. Pity that, with all your common-sense, you see no further than the world—the world, as may come to an end for you to-morrow. Blind—blind—blind like all the rest. And I s'pose you'll continue blind till it's too late, and then you'll lift up your eyes and see the ruin and the horror of the whole thing, and maybe the ruin as ye've wrought on others."

The woman glowered at her astonished listener

with a scowl that was only saved from an appearance of the most hateful malice by the utter misery which seemed to underlie it. Miss Jorkaway, now firmly convinced that she had a lunatic to deal with, began to gather courage. Here was a real adventure. A crazy or otherwise mysterious upper servant was one of the characters she took the very deepest interest in, and there was no doubt that at last she had lighted upon an unmistakable and most magnificent specimen. A thrill of delight passed through her, and she braced herself anew for the campaign. The woman evidently had a "history"; there was a secret about her somewhere, and her wild and whirling words, if only attentively studied, would no doubt furnish the required clue. Miss Jorkaway seated herself firmly upon the box, and began to draw her out as scientifically as she knew how.

"I have no doubt that what you say is perfectly true," she said in a more conciliatory tone, "though what it all means I haven't the ghost of an idea. You seem to be afraid lest I shall do some mischief in the family, and bring ruin upon myself and others. Can't you try and speak a little more plainly?"

Virtue looked at her with the same distrustful gaze, and shook her head gloomily.

"There's few as be saved," she said, "and it's ten million to one as you're not one of 'em."

Miss Jorkaway nearly jumped off her seat, but restrained herself sufficiently to wait and see what would come next.

"The rest of us will be all damned for the glory o' God," continued the strange creature. "That's *my* fate, and I've been resigned to it for years. But there's others—others as one can't be sure of. Maybe there's a chance for them. You're to be Miss Cynthia's governess, I'm told?"

Miss Jorkaway, catching her breath, acknowledged that that was true.

"Then remember this—that you've got a human soul to answer for!" exclaimed Virtue, raising her hand with an almost prophetic gesture. "They've taken her away from me, and are making her over to a stranger. My day's over, and yours is come. But beware. It's a sore thing to lose one's own soul, but it's a thousand times more awful to lose someone else's. I've offered mine for Cynthia's, but how can I tell it's been accepted? For no man can redeem another, or give to God a ransom for him. That's my message to you, miss, and I warn you to lay it well to heart."

"You horrible, shocking old woman!" cried Miss Jorkaway, rising from her box and confronting Virtue Sexton with indignant rage. "How dare you come into my room and insult me with such wicked nonsense? I've listened to you long enough; leave me, if you please, at once. What is Miss Cynthia to you, that you should take such atrocious liberties with her name?"

'Cynthia is *my child*," returned Virtue huskily.

For a moment or two Miss Jorkaway stared

blankly at the other, not quite sure that she had heard aright. Then, before she had recovered from her astonishment, Virtue Sexton turned slowly round, and glided towards the wall. Again the gap appeared in the quaintly decorated wall-paper, showing a glimpse of the dark passage beyond; the woman cast one glance behind her—a sullen glance of unconcealed dislike and menace—heaved a great sigh, and, without further leave-taking, vanished as suddenly and mysteriously as she had come.

The whole thing had passed so quickly (for it was not much more than five minutes since Miss Jorkaway's privacy had been first invaded) that she could scarcely realize that it was not all a dream. There lay her dresses and fal-lals, just as they had lain before; the room was strewn with the heterogeneous contents of her boxes, now half unpacked; the wall looked as innocent and as compact as ever And yet she had actually had a visit from a madwoman—a madwoman who, there was not the slightest doubt, was her most determined enemy! In all her wonderings and speculations Miss Jorkaway had never dreamt of this. It surpassed her fondest hopes. Visions of darkest mysteries in a guilty past, and of thrilling discoveries in the future, now filled her mind with a most delightful sense of expectation. It was evident that the pleasant, cheerful, matter-of-fact country house had a skeleton in one of its cupboards, if not a baker's dozen of them. There were secrets here indeed; and to

Miss Jorkaway the mere suspicion of a secret was as the scent of a fox to an old huntsman. For some time she remained plunged in the profoundest meditation, cudgelling her brains to discover, if possible, a clue to the strange words of Virtue Sexton. Who was she? How did she come to be there? What was the matter with her, and what could be her history?

A quick, light step in the passage outside, and a sharp little rap at the door, here aroused Miss Jorkaway from her reverie.

"May I come in?" cried Cynthia.

Miss Jorkaway got up and opened the door with a flourish.

"I'm glad you've come," she said excitedly—"I'm very glad you've come. I want very much to speak to you."

"Well, here I am," said Cynthia in her bright way, as she entered. "Can I help you to unpack? I hope you've got everything you want. You needn't have any mercy on the bells in this house if ever you want anything; they're meant to be rung. Of course you've had some tea. Have you seen Nora yet?"

"I have," replied Miss Jorkaway. "I have also seen Mrs. Cherryfield. And I have seen *another* person, about whom I want to say a word to you."

Cynthia looked puzzled.

"Another person?" she echoed, with a little laugh. "Who can that have been, I wonder?"

"A very strange person—a person who, it seems to me, is not quite right in her head," returned Miss Jorkaway, fixing her eyes on Cynthia. "*My* nerves are pretty strong, I'm glad to say; but if it had been someone else, some timid, hysterical creature, which I am *not*, she might have frightened her into fits. I'm not easily scared, thank goodness; at the same time, when the wall of one's bedroom suddenly opens, and a mysterious lunatic comes crawling in and staring one out of countenance, the situation becomes embarrassing. I do trust there are not more of the same sort about?"

"What!" cried Cynthia, an expression coming over her face in which irrepressible amusement mingled very comically with real annoyance and regret, "you don't mean to tell me that you've had a visit from poor old Virtue Sexton?"

"I do mean to tell you just that," replied Miss Jorkaway. "And as, of course, you know her a great deal better than I do, I needn't describe her proceedings. Why don't you put her into an asylum?"

"Oh, I am so sorry," exclaimed Cynthia. "It never occurred to me as possible that she might annoy you, otherwise I should have taken measures to prevent it. I hope she wasn't very disagreeable—was she?"

"I should say that she was the most disagreeable person that I ever met," replied Miss Jorkaway; "but, mind, I don't say she's not interesting. On

the contrary, she interests me immensely. Come, tell me all about her. I'm sure she has a very remarkable history."

"I'll tell you all I know," said Cynthia, sitting on one of Miss Jorkaway's trunks, and tossing a lock of curly hair off her forehead. "She came here first about eighteen years ago—a few months, in fact, before I was born. There'd been some trouble, I think—I don't quite know what; but we found afterwards that she had lost her only daughter, and it had had an effect upon her mind. She was the most melancholy creature you can imagine. Mamma put it down to face-ache at first, and papa said he thought it must be Calvinism; and, as you may suppose, she wasn't a very cheerful sort of person to have about the house. In fact, the only reason she was kept on was her devotion to *me*. She'd have gone through fire and water for me; she just doted on me, and I know mamma had her work cut out to prevent me from being spoilt altogether. For years it was a regular battle. Do you know, Miss Jorkaway, I believe that that woman actually got an idea into her head that somehow or other I was the child she had lost come into the world again? It's a fact, although I've never got her to acknowledge it in so many words. She can't acknowledge it, you see, because it goes against her religion—she's an awful Calvinist, you know—but, of course, these poor half-crazy creatures have the most inconsistent ideas, and there's no reasoning with them. Well, and

she's been with us ever since. It's a queer story, isn't it?"

"I was sure that woman had a history," exclaimed Miss Jorkaway. "Then, that explains what she meant——"

"Meant by what?" asked Cynthia, as the other paused.

"Well, she said she was your mother!" replied Miss Jorkaway. "Or, rather, to be quite accurate, that you were her child. No wonder I put her down as mad."

"Foolish old creature!" muttered Cynthia, evidently annoyed. "Yes, no doubt that was what she meant. And of course she's naturally very jealous of you, because you're to be my governess, you see. Well, all I can say is, that you mustn't pay any attention to her nonsense. I'm very fond of the poor old dear, and I feel for her to the bottom of my heart; but we can't give in to her vagaries, of course. I shall scold her for frightening you, though. She had no business to come in in that way, and I promise you it shan't occur again."

"I think I should like that invisible door in the wall fastened up," said Miss Jorkaway. "The poor soul isn't right in her head, evidently, and I've no notion of her prowling into my room in the middle of the night."

"We can do it at once," said Cynthia. "We have only to put the key on this side; or stay—let us lock it, and then you can keep the key yourself.

There, now you're quite safe. We've no ghosts here," she continued, laughing, "as I told you before, but I quite acknowledge that poor old Virtue would be almost as bad as a ghost if she were really to go prowling about unhindered. However, she shan't frighten you any more, I promise you."

Miss Jorkaway murmured her acknowledgments, and began arranging her dresses again.

"Oh, I'm not easily frightened," she said indifferently; "but one doesn't like to be disturbed, you know, especially by a poor creature like that. One never knows what she may do or say next; and really, if I weren't the most unsuspicious being who ever lived, I should have been seriously perplexed by what she said. Some people, now, would have built an entire romance upon it. It's lucky that I'm the matter-of-fact person I am, or there's no knowing what absurd ideas I mightn't have run away with."

The fact was that Miss Jorkaway was somewhat disappointed at the solution of the mystery afforded by Cynthia's story. To do her credit, it never occurred to her to doubt the truth of it, and she felt that a most interesting and promising enigma had been prematurely explained. It was still possible, however, that there was something more to be discovered, and that Cynthia herself might have been only repeating what she had been told, with an object, by her parents; so with this comforting reflection she shook out one or two more of her gowns, arranged her toilet-articles upon the dressing-

table, and formed a private resolution to postpone her final opinion until after further research.

"What pretty frocks you have, to be sure," said Cynthia politely, as she watched Miss Jorkaway bustling hither and thither. "We don't dress very much down here. That muslin must be something quite new. It's rather like the wall-paper."

"Like the wall-paper!" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway, aghast. "Why, the pattern of that wall-paper must be a century old at the very least!"

"Oh, those old patterns are always coming in again," replied Cynthia. "Besides, I never go much by the fashions. I like whatever's pretty. What are you going to put on for dinner?"

"I was thinking of this gray poplin," said Miss Jorkaway, as she indicated the article referred to; "but as you say you don't dress much here——"

"Oh, that will do excellently!" interrupted Cynthia, who was looking indescribably fresh and dainty in a cream-coloured cashmere, with a bunch of bright-crimson flowers at her throat. "Papa never notices what one has on, and we've nobody coming but the Rector. That gray poplin will be just the thing."

"The Rector?" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway quickly. "Oh, well then——"

"Oh, you needn't mind the Rector," laughed Cynthia. "He's just like one of the family. If you're bent on arming yourself for conquest, you'll have plenty of opportunities when those people come

down next month. I dare say they'll put all our noses out of joint with the very latest novelties. What's that meat-safe sort of thing hanging over in that cupboard?"

"That's my—dress-improver," replied Miss Jorkaway. "Don't you ever wear dress-improvers in this part of the world?"

"Oh, a bustle—I see," said Cynthia. "No, I don't wear them. I hate petticoats anyhow. They get so frightfully in one's way, and are such a weight to carry. I'd go about in a kilt if I dared."

"A kilt!" echoed Miss Jorkaway, scandalized.

"Well, knickerbockers, then," rejoined Cynthia, with a laugh. "But, really, I mustn't interrupt you any longer. You know your way downstairs? We dine in twenty minutes."

So saying, Miss Cynthia tripped out of the room, leaving Miss Jorkaway to arm herself for conquest or not, as she preferred. That astute lady, after due reflection, decided to array herself in the gray poplin aforesaid, set off with a judicious arrangement of imitation black lace and jet spangles, the result being, as she observed to herself, exactly suitable to the occasion, as far as she was able to grasp what the occasion was likely to be. It was undeniably a bold and striking figure that looked back at her from the ample toilet-glass—a very decided figure, suggestive of much steel and whalebone, and presenting a marked contrast to young Cynthia's lissom grace; surmounted, too, by a square, uncompromising

THE PROPERTY OF THE

head, with strong sleek black hair, and handsome eyes, and a nose whose eager outline spoke volumes for the character of its possessor. Virtue had made some personal remarks that were the reverse of complimentary, it was true; but, then, Virtue was a woman, and jealous, and rather old, besides being partly off her head, so that her blunt allusions to Miss Jorkaway's marks of care were beneath the notice of a true philosopher. On the whole, Miss Jorkaway was well satisfied with her appearance. She gave her tags a few final pulls and twitches and twists, and then descended the broad old shelving staircase to meet the assembled family at dinner.

CHAPTER IV.

THE COUNTY FAMILY.

On the hearthrug in front of the fireplace, as Miss Jorkaway entered the drawing-room, she saw a slight, elderly, vague-looking gentleman with gray hair and thin whiskers, rather badly dressed in evening clothes. His coat hung limply on his sloping shoulders; his shirt-front, though perfectly clean, had a crumpled and ill-starched appearance; his double eye-glasses, for which he seemed to be fumbling and fumbling in vain, were hanging behind his left elbow; his necktie was twisted into a lopsided, careless bow. Miss Jorkaway at once divined that she stood in the presence of the Squire. Whether the Squire divined with equal promptitude that he stood in the presence of Miss Jorkaway did not appear by any means so certain. He gazed mildly at her in a short-sighted, hesitating way as she approached, shifted his feet about nervously, hemmed and hawed once or twice as though embarrassed, and finally held out his hand to her with a slow smile. Miss Jorkaway, meanwhile, advanced in her best society manner—

her head erect, her mouth pursed tightly up, and her black eyes shining with eagerness and curiosity.

"Er—Miss Jorkaway," she said, seeing at a glance that the Squire was quite uncertain as to who she was.

"To be sure, to be sure," replied the Squire, but without any recognition in his voice. "Yes, yes; my wife told me that a lady was expected. I hope you left your family all well?"

"I *have* no family!" said Miss Jorkaway, rather taken aback.

"Dear me," was the Squire's only comment. "Ah.—And how are things looking in London now? Much as usual, I suppose?"

"What sort of things?" demanded Miss Jorkaway, much perplexed.

"Oh, well, the things people talk about," replied the Squire, with an absent laugh. "They're very much the same everywhere, I take it. At least, they used to be in my time. And how do you amuse yourself, now, when you're at home?"

Miss Jorkaway could scarcely be expected to confess that she spent her life in spying and gossiping and setting other people by the ears, partly, at any rate, because she was quite unconscious of it herself. She looked more puzzled than ever for a moment; then a thought struck her, and she said the best thing possible under the circumstances.

"I very seldom am at home, Mr. Cherryfield. I spend most of my time in travelling."

"Travelling, eh?" continued the Squire. "Ah, that's a luxury I can't afford. Ever been in Italy, now, I wonder?"

"No, never," said Miss Jorkaway.

"That's a pity," said the Squire regretfully. "A fine place, Italy—at least, it used to be, when it was in its glory, at the time of the Renaissance, you know. Ah, there were great men in those days. We shall never see their like again. And what have they been doing at the Institution lately?"

"What institution?" asked Miss Jorkaway, beginning to feel resentful.

"The Royal," answered Mr. Cherryfield. "The Royal, to be sure. How was that paper of Brainpicker's received, now, on the Refractive and Dispersive Powers of Metallic Carbonyls?"

"I never heard of Brainpicker," replied Miss Jorkaway, wondering what this dreamy gentleman would ask her next. "Is he an author?"

"Never heard of Brainpicker—Dr. Brainpicker, the most eminent synthesist of the day?" exclaimed the Squire, roused into something like astonishment. "Mi-raculous!"

"Didn't even know he was born!" retorted Miss Jorkaway in desperation. "I am afraid my acquaintance with such matters is very limited, Mr. Cherryfield; science is beyond my powers—not in my line, in fact. My observations have generally lain in other directions altogether."

"Well, well," replied the Squire soothingly.

"And so you *have* an observing mind, though it moves in other directions. Everybody can't take an interest in science, of course. Even my own wife and children bend their attention to other matters. Still, a habit of observation is a good thing—a very good thing. And what's your special hobby? How do you spend your time?"

Miss Jorkaway was quite at a loss for an answer. In fact, she was not prepared for this artless cross-examination. She had come downstairs with the intention of interviewing the Squire, and now here was the Squire interviewing her instead! She thought for a moment, and then said hesitatingly:

"Really, Mr. Cherryfield, it's rather difficult to say. There are so many things that take up one's time, you know; and then——"

"Well, what do you do when you get up in the morning?" pursued the Squire, entirely unconscious of how very disagreeable he was making himself.

"Why, I have my breakfast," replied Miss Jorkaway rather shortly.

"Oh!" exclaimed the Squire, disconcerted in his turn. "Yes, I suppose you do. That is not exactly what I meant; but still—— By the way, talking of breakfast, it's about time we had our dinner, I think. It's just on the stroke of seven."

Just then the door opened, and Mrs. Cherryfield appeared, followed by Nora and Cynthia. The Squire put his hands under his coat-tails with a mild expression of self-complacency, induced by the

thought how successfully he had been entertaining the guest during his wife's absence. He was not a talkative man generally, and he really had made an effort of which he was rather proud.

"Oh, here you are!" said Mrs. Cherryfield as she advanced. "You have introduced yourself to Miss Jorkaway already, no doubt." That lady bowed sardonically. "How warm it is to-night, to be sure! And how the days are lengthening!"

"It certainly is warmer here than in London," remarked Miss Jorkaway. The Squire, relieved from his duties of entertainer, now shuffled a little way off, and began moving aimlessly about the room. "I see you have a charming view of the garden from the window there."

Nora, who was looking very graceful and high-bred in a square-cut bodice and clinging dress of black lace, replied smilingly:

"Yes—haven't we? Cynthia will do the honours of the garden to you in the morning; that is her province, as I dare say she has told you. And then you must come into my sanctum, and let me show you my library."

"I shall be delighted," said Miss Jorkaway. "You are a great reader, I believe?"

"Oh yes, Nora's the studious one," put in Mrs. Cherryfield pleasantly. "She takes after her father in that. She knows more than Cynthia and I do both together."

"Nonsense!" said Nora, laughing. "You mustn't

take everything that mother says *au pied de la lettre*, Miss Jorkaway. I happen to be fond of reading, just as Cynthia happens to be fond of gardening, that's all. It would be very uninteresting if we all had the same tastes."

"To be sure," said Mrs. Cherryfield comfortably. "Cynthia, come here a minute, my love; your frill is all awry. That's better, now. You must be careful of your frills, you know. How did Pipeclay go this afternoon?"

"Like a duck!" answered Cynthia. "We came along at a spanking pace—didn't we, Miss Jorkaway?"

"Ducks are famous for going at a spanking pace, of course," remarked Nora in parenthesis.

"Well, you know what I mean," said Cynthia. "When *I* say a duck I mean a dear. I can't bear people who are always pulling one's words to pieces. By the way, I brought that book for you from the Post Office; I'll give it to you after dinner."

"Oh, thanks; I'm glad it's come at last," said Nora. "I shall be able to get on capitally now. Did Mrs. Pasfield say why she hadn't sent it up before?"

"Did you ever know that old woman give a reason for not doing anything that she ought to have done?" retorted Cynthia. "She's a dreadful old stupid, and gets deafer and deafer every year."

"I suppose you didn't hear any news in the village?" asked Mrs. Cherryfield.

"Not a word," replied Cynthia. "Oh, how hungry I am getting, to be sure! I do wish they'd bring up dinner."

"The Rector will be here in a minute now," rejoined her mother. "What time is it by your watch, my dear?"

There was no answer to this inquiry, and Mrs. Cherryfield, looking round, found that the Squire had disappeared. The next moment, however, and before she could express her surprise, the expected guest arrived. The door opened, and a gentleman came in whose appearance was sufficiently striking to arrest the attention of any stranger who saw him for the first time. His face was a clear, vivid scarlet, set off with snow-white hair and whiskers; his features were prominent and well cut, his eyes bright and searching, and his dress that of a well-placed clergyman of the old school. He looked a man of sixty-two or thereabouts, but his real age was some years more; and Miss Jorkaway was not far wrong when she thought that the sturdy, weather-beaten, hearty, elderly gentleman who now stood before her was a far truer realization of what a squire ought to be than Squire Cherryfield himself, who, indeed, would have made a very decent parson of the recluse and studious order. The fact is that there was just a touch of the squarson about the Rector. He belonged to the old-fashioned, moderate High Church party, and had small sympathy with the attitudinarians, as he called them, of more recent

years; was a fair classical scholar, enjoyed his claret (which was always the very best procurable), rode about his parish on a well-groomed horse, and never, if he could possibly help it, missed any of the great cricket-matches at Lord's. Such was the Rev. Courtenay Giles, Rector of Cherryfield and Rural Dean, upon whom Miss Jorkaway bestowed the most stately bow that her panoply of buckram would permit.

"Now I won't be scolded," said the Rector, rubbing his hands together with an air of great determination. "I know I'm ten minutes late, but I couldn't help it, and I'm not going to make any excuses, so you needn't scowl at me like that, Cynthia." Cynthia, by the way, happened to be looking particularly amiable just then. "And how have you been, my dear friend?" he continued, turning to Mrs. Cherryfield. "I got your note the other day about the biscuits; you were quite right—quite, as you always are. I hope you haven't had any return of the neuralgia?"

"Nothing to speak of, since I saw you," replied Mrs. Cherryfield. "We're all of us as well as possible, I'm glad to say. Did you walk up?"

"I did—been in my study nearly all day, and felt that my legs wanted stretching. What a day it has been, to be sure! Exercise, fresh air, and sunshine—those make up the true elixir of life, you know. Nothing like 'em—nothing. Is there, Nora?"

"And an easy conscience," replied Nora, laughing.

"Had me there!" rejoined the Rector. "Where's the Squire?"

"Cynthia, my dear, where *can* your father be?" said Mrs. Cherryfield, turning with a perplexed air to her younger daughter. "He was here not five minutes ago."

"Perhaps he forgot what time of day it was, and has gone to bed," suggested Cynthia carelessly.

"Then you'd better go and rout him out," observed the Rector.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Nora; "he'll be down directly. It's never any use waiting for him, you know. We'd better go in at once."

The entrance of a servant to announce that dinner was ready decided the question. Everyone arose; and Mrs. Cherryfield, with a good-humoured shrug of her shoulders, asked the Rector, in the absence of her husband, to give his arm to Miss Jorkaway. That lady accordingly hooked herself on to Mr. Giles's elbow in due form, and led the way into the dining-room, followed by her hostess and the two girls. A surprise awaited them, however, as soon as the door was opened; for there, at one end of the dinner-table, placidly munching his bread, sat the missing Squire—wondering, to all appearance, why the others had been so long in following him!

"How late you are!" remarked the master of the house, in his mild, absent way. "I've been waiting for you for the last ten minutes."

"Waiting for *us*?" exclaimed his wife, when her

astonishment allowed her to speak. "We couldn't think what on earth had become of you. What in the world did you come in here for all by yourself?"

"I began to feel rather hungry," said the Squire simply. "It's nearly a quarter-past seven."

"Reginald, I give you up!" cried Mrs. Cherryfield in humorous despair. "See what it is to be married to a student, Miss Jorkaway, and take warning. Rector, come and sit by me; and you, Miss Jorkaway, next to the Squire on the other side. Now, then, we're all right. Thomas, just open that further window from the top. A few inches will do—that's enough. One wants a little fresh air on a night like this."

Then the Rector went through a very curious performance. He suddenly came to a dead stop by the side of the table; raised his right hand threateningly; shut his eyes tight, and screwed up the rest of his face into an expression of the strangest and most ludicrous ferocity. He said nothing—nothing audible, at least; and the profoundest silence reigned for about two seconds. Then he as suddenly relaxed, and, uttering an "Ah!" of relief, sat down in his chair with the benignant smile of a man about to enjoy a reward that had been honestly and fairly earned.

Miss Jorkaway, who was not at all prepared for this proceeding, and did not know quite what to make of it, glanced inquiringly round the table; everybody else, however, seemed to take it quite as

a matter of course, and she therefore came to the conclusion that it must be the Rector's usual way of saying grace. She regretted a little that she had not been assigned a place rather nearer to Mr. Giles, feeling (and not unnaturally) that she had had quite enough of the Squire for that evening; but still she had the compensation of being able to watch him and listen to his conversation without participating in it herself, and forthwith prepared herself to take notes.

"Ah," said the Rector, drinking a glass of sherry with an air of infinite content, as his soup-plate was removed, "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work—that's my philosophy of life. I always like to feel that I've earned my dinner, then it's sure to agree with me. I hope you don't forget to study political economy, Cynthia, among all your other avocations?"

"I hope I don't," replied Cynthia, with a comic *moue*.

"The administration of a parish is harder work than the government of an empire, it seems to me," continued the Rector. "One may get some little credit for saving one's country, but the tender mercies of churchwardens are cruel. You're a lucky man, Squire, to be able to gang your own gait as you do."

"Have you been having any more trouble with Mr. Pennyweather?" asked Mrs. Cherryfield, smiling.

"Faith, I have indeed," replied the Rector; "a plague on all grocers, say I, when they must be

meddling. Well, we all have our crumpled rose-leaves, and my roseleaf is that man Pennyweather. Don't look at me like that, Cynthia—a roseleaf isn't a term of abuse. You're rather like a roseleaf yourself, if it comes to that."

"Oh, thank you, Rector; what a pretty compliment!" said Cynthia, laughing. "A little invidious, though, being included in it with your pet aversion. What has he been doing now?"

"Come, don't spoil my dinner," said the Rector, beginning to eat his fish. "I don't want to think of him any more. Have you seen the papers to-day, Squire?"

"Er—I think so, didn't I, my dear?" said the Squire, appealing to his wife. "Really, one paper is so very much like another——"

"I don't think you did, father," put in Nora. "I found the *Times* uncut upon your table this afternoon, so I took it away to read myself."

"They say the Ministry is shaky," pursued the Rector, "and I hope it is. I never did believe in an Irish Premier. Celts are all very well in their way, but I don't want them to govern *us*. Look at that Bill they brought in last session for the surrender of Gibraltar to Spain in return for some trumpery reduction in the duties on port and sherry! A pretty idea of patriotism those fellows must have. But they won't be able to pass it—let 'em try if they dare. They're going to pieces quite fast enough as it is."

"Who introduced it?" asked the Squire, with languid interest.

"The O'Collar Don, of course—who else?" replied the Rector scornfully. "And it's said that even that was to be nothing but a prelude to selling all our Suez Canal shares to France at some preposterous discount. You should take more interest in politics, Squire. A man like you, with all your influence in the county, oughtn't to shirk his duties. It's a cruel thing, Sir, to see the bulwarks of the country bartered away under our very eyes, without a man putting out his hand to stop the outrage. I consider that the O'Collar Don's administration has been as fatal to all our interests as a three years' run of bad harvests, with a panic on the Stock Exchange thrown in."

"It's a pity he can't be removed," remarked the Squire placidly.

"Removed—in the sense of *aiutata*, eh?" rejoined the Rector, laughing. "That's what comes of your unholy studies, Squire. No, let him live his life out, and meanwhile we'll bring about his removal by rather more constitutional expedients."

"I wasn't suggesting any extreme methods," said the Squire in his simple way. "Of course, in other times and countries so dangerous a man as you describe him to be would simply have disappeared. The system may have had its advantages—on that I express no opinion; but I fully admit that it was open to occasional abuse."

"Don't talk in that shocking way, father!" exclaimed Nora, with a nervous laugh. "What will Miss Jorkaway think?"

"I think it's all very interesting," replied that lady, speaking up for the first time. "I am fond of original ideas."

"I'm afraid you're a sad pagan, Squire," said the Rector, in half-humorous reproof. "You don't care for politics, I know, but there are things in the papers that interest you, eh? The case of that woman that was hanged the other day, for instance. You remember that?"

The Squire nodded gravely.

"Yes, yes, I remember it," he said. "The poisoning case. What of it?"

"Why, I was thinking what possible solution there could be of the disgusting and unnatural instinct which prompts people to sympathize with a monster like that Sarah Wilson, and actually attempt to save her from the gallows," answered the Rector. "To my mind it is as inexplicable as it is revolting. No one sympathizes, apparently, with the victims she doomed to an agonizing death—all feeling is reserved for the murderess. Look at the beastly sentiment that Frenchwomen lavished on Pranzini some years ago, too—sending him flowers and love-letters and heaven knows what all. All this fuss there's been about the woman Wilson is an exhibition of the same perverted instinct. I don't know what we're coming to, I'm sure."

The Rector shot a glance at Mr. Cherryfield as he said this which showed that he was speaking with an object. He really was afraid lest the Squire's peculiar studies should have led him, too, to sympathize with this woman, and he wanted to draw him out. The Squire rose to the bait.

"The woman was justly hanged," he said indifferently. "I never felt any sympathy for her myself."

"Faith, I'm glad to hear that, now," exclaimed the Rector, as he poured out a glass of hock. "If ever a woman deserved her fate, she did."

"Yes," assented the Squire, crumbling his bread. "She was a most inartistic bungler. To use strychnine, for instance—a violent drug which produces symptoms that cannot be mistaken for anything else, and which must inevitably lead to detection! How can anyone sympathize with such folly? She might just as well have hacked the patient to pieces with an axe. But that is always the way when an ignorant and clumsy person attempts to meddle with any of the more delicate arts of precision. There was a time, now——"

"Reginald, for mercy's sake!" cried Mrs. Cherryfield in horror. "My dear, you don't mean it, I dare say, but the impression you convey is shocking to the last degree. I do beg you to keep such theories to yourself."

"I was speaking simply from the standpoint of pure art, my dear," replied the Squire mildly. "I

did not touch upon the moral side of the question, which is a matter totally distinct. I do not think you have ever heard me defend poisoning as such, have you? But if you, for example, were to see a butcher, who only knows how to cut up carcases, attempting to perform some singularly delicate operation in surgery——"

"Or Squire Cherryfield, with the best intentions in the world, attempting to carve a goose," interposed Cynthia, with great demureness.

There was a general laugh at this, for the fact was that, on the very last occasion when the Rector had dined there, the Squire had obstinately insisted on making the experiment in question, but only succeeded in mangling the bird in a most woeful manner, and covering himself with ignominy. The allusion was happily timed, and relieved Mrs. Cherryfield from the pursuance of a subject which was becoming really painful to her.

"A hit, a palpable hit," said the Rector approvingly. "Nothing like the *argumentum ad hominem*. You'll find your pupil has a very pretty wit, Miss Jorkaway, and that she'll do full justice to your instructions."

"I have already arrived at that conclusion myself," replied Miss Jorkaway, with an arch toss of her head.

"So you're not thinking of going up to town this year?" remarked the Rector, changing the conversation.

"What! leave the country when it is looking its very best?" exclaimed Mrs. Cherryfield. "No, indeed. Besides, we are expecting visitors."

"Ah, to be sure; I forgot that," answered Mr. Giles. "You'll have a full house next month. Squire, you'll have to come out of your shell, and show your guests the way across country—do you all the good in the world, you know. Nothing like plenty of out-door exercise for strengthening the body to bear the exertions of the mind."

"Show my guests the way across country?" repeated the Squire, rather alarmed. "Why, I don't know it myself!"

"Well, I never supposed you did," chuckled the Rector; "but you ought to, you know. People say that I'm rather a harsh magistrate at times, but I never can bring myself to be very severe on vagrants—sturdy, wholesome-looking, sunburnt chaps, who are always in the open air. In fact, I have a sort of fellow-feeling for them, somehow. Why don't you make your father walk more, Cynthia, eh?"

"He won't," said Cynthia laconically.

"I tell Miss Jorkaway she must see what *she* can do," said Mrs. Cherryfield. "I'm getting too stout to take very long walks myself. But seriously, Reginald, you'll have to go out occasionally with some of our friends, if only for appearance' sake."

"Whom are you expecting?" asked the Rector, helping himself to peas.

"H'm—let me see," replied Mrs. Cherryfield

meditatively. "There are the Crotchetts, and Dr. Tabernacle, Mrs. St. Paul, a Mr. Veryan, Lady Marian Alabaster, Miss Walker from Norfolk (I forget whether you know her), and—who else now? I think there are one or two more."

"Hugh," suggested Nora.

"I counted Hugh, didn't I?" answered Mrs. Cherryfield. "He is included with the Crotchetts, of course. Sir Thomas would take it very ill if Hugh were left out; you know how sensitive he is. Well, that's the list as it stands at present. There may be modifications in it in the meantime, but of course we can't tell. Oh—and Blanche Alabaster; she accompanies her mother."

"Who are the Alabasters?" asked the Rector, looking puzzled. "I don't think I ever heard of them."

"She is a sister of the Earl of Haslemere," replied Mrs. Cherryfield. "Mr. Alabaster has been dead some years. He was one of the Northumbrian Alabasters, you know—a very good family, though poor. Lady Marian is an excellent woman—one of the very best women I know. She's remarkably clever and well read, and is always doing good to somebody in a quiet sort of way. There's something very sweet about dear Blanche, too. Just a trifle cold, perhaps——"

"As sweet and as cold as a Neapolitan ice," remarked Cynthia. "I always feel inclined to wrap up when she comes near me."

"And who's Mr. Veryan?" inquired the Rector. "That's a new name to me altogether."

"He's someone I met a few months ago, when I was staying a couple of weeks with some friends in Dorsetshire," said Mrs. Cherryfield. "I fancy he has travelled a good deal, and certainly he can be a very interesting talker when he likes. But I know very little more about him, except that he's a confirmed bachelor, and has rather a reputation for eccentricity. He never cares what he says, and seems quite unconscious of what other people think of him. Oh, he's decidedly amusing; just the sort of man, you know, to mix up well with a party in a country house."

"H'm," muttered the Rector, with a humorously doubtful look.

"Mother's the only one of us who has seen this Mr. Veryan," put in Cynthia, "so she's responsible for him. An eccentric old bachelor—could one wish for a more promising description? He and Dr. Tabernacle will make an excellent couple. They'll just suit each other, and be able to exchange views on the Labour Question and the respective merits of rappee and high-dried Scotch."

"My dear Cynthia," said Mrs. Cherryfield reprovingly, "you do let your imagination run away with you a very great deal too fast. Mr. Veryan is not in the least like Dr. Tabernacle, and he isn't at all old; I should call him middle-aged, though what his age may be I confess I have no idea. He is one

of those men who might be almost any age. I shouldn't be surprised if he had looked just as he looks now for twenty years or more."

"A conclusive proof of his juvenility," laughed Cynthia. "There are some people, I believe, who take almost a lifetime to grow old."

Miss Jorkaway had listened to all this with the very deepest interest. Her well-trained faculty recognised at once a most encouraging number of mysteries in connection with the expected visitors, and of these she made full mental notes. The person referred to as Hugh was evidently mysterious. Who could he be? Was he the son of Sir Thomas and Lady Crotchett? Was there anything peculiar about him, to account for Sir Thomas's alleged sensitiveness on his behalf? Then, again, there was clearly something worth discovering about Mr. Veryan, the person of uncertain age and doubtful antecedents, whom no one in the house had seen excepting Mrs. Cherryfield. The notion of a Lady Marian, too, was distinctly agreeable to Miss Jorkaway, who had never had an opportunity of studying persons of quality at close quarters; while as for Dr. Tabernacle, Miss Jorkaway had an amazing *penchant* for old doctors, who held a high place in her list of *dramatis personæ* as time-honoured confederates or counterplotters. And then, in addition to all these, there was her grand discovery of a respectable female lunatic! No wonder Miss Jorkaway's eyes glistened as she turned her head from

side to side so as not to lose a word of the conversation, and that so delightful a sense of complacency stole over her. The memory of Miss Spicer and Mrs. Dawdleby and the other inmates of Pilton's Boarding-house occurred to her for one moment, and enhanced her satisfaction. She had indeed moved up in the world since she left Fitzroy Square that morning.

The conversation drifted on to other subjects, and these proved of less interest to the new governess than those which had preceded them. But she had plenty to think about, and her cogitations proved a most acceptable seasoning to the excellent dinner she was enjoying. The Rector, capital company as he seemed, was not particularly important from the standpoint of social strategy. The same was more or less the case with Cynthia. She was easily seen through; still, there were capabilities about her which rendered her interesting—for instance, she might easily become the unconscious centre of some intrigue; and, indeed, there was already something to be found out about her in connection with the old madwoman, Virtue Sexton, whom Miss Jorkaway fully intended to watch, if not to cultivate. The Squire, again, was evidently a very simple man, by no means difficult to understand; but about Mrs. Cherryfield and Nora Miss Jorkaway reserved judgment. It was nearly half-past eight when the ladies rose from table, and the evening was spent in a quiet, uneventful, country fashion. At ten the

Rector left, and soon after Mrs. Cherryfield, feeling perfectly sure that the new-comer must be tired to death, proposed a general adjournment. The bedroom was reached in safety; no stealthy footsteps were heard; no mysterious skirts were seen vanishing round a corner. The wall, with its parrot, its poppy, and its shepherdess, continued in its normal condition as a wall, without once opening to disclose a yawning gulf behind; and Miss Jorkaway, who was really fatigued, closed her eyes as soon as she got into bed, and sank into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER V.

DREAMS, AND THE STUFF THEY'RE MADE OF.

LIFE at Cherryfield Hall was a rather methodical affair, but none the less pleasant, perhaps, for that. Breakfast was always served punctually at eight o'clock, and was well over by a quarter to nine; then Mrs. Cherryfield began to bustle about the house, while Nora, Cynthia, and Miss Jorkaway disported themselves in the garden. At half-past nine, or a little later, Nora would disappear into her study, where she was carrying on a course of reading congenial to her own tastes, and the others settled down to what Cynthia called her lessons for two full hours and a half. It was true enough that Cynthia's mind was in a sadly uncultivated state; but she was so bright and quick, her literary judgments were so singularly fresh, prompt, and accurate, and her desire to learn so sincere, that she would have done justice to a far better guide than ever Miss Jorkaway could be. It cannot be said that she selected the very deepest subjects. Metaphysics she left to Nora, who was supposed to be inspired by an intellectual

passion for Hegel and Spinoza; but Macaulay's "History of England" kept her spellbound for weeks, judiciously varied by excursions into Fawcett's "Political Economy" (which she frankly detested, but stuck to valorously nevertheless), and Aristotle's "Ethics" in a translation. Miss Jorkaway, of course, was too intent upon the ins and outs of domestic life and the clash of individual interests to care very much for the problems of capital and labour or the Doctrine of the Mean; it was, however, her cue to ingratiate herself with her pupil in every possible way, and if the road to confidence lay through such very rough and dusty neighbourhoods, the inconvenience must be endured. At half-past twelve the books were closed, and Miss Jorkaway, feeling that she had justified her existence for that day, accompanied Cynthia (Nora sometimes being of the party) in an hour's walk before luncheon. The afternoon was generally devoted to driving or visiting, or anything else which might present itself; and they dined at seven o'clock. It was altogether a very innocent and very happy life—certainly the happiest that Miss Jorkaway had spent for years; while for the first time since she could remember she was actually of some use.

It must not be supposed, however, that the satisfaction afforded to her by this newborn sense of virtue was sufficient to supersede her taste for more pungent pleasures. Her curiosity was as great as ever. She longed to discover all that there was to

be known about every member of the household, from the Squire to the scullery-maids, and was in despair when she had been a fortnight in Cherryfield Hall without having once seen the cook. Virtue Sexton, too, she had almost entirely lost sight of. This was no doubt partially her own fault, for, had she not made that imprudent complaint to Cynthia, no restraint would have been put on the old woman's movements, and she would have had many opportunities of encouraging her to talk. Still, she was by no means without resources. The housemaid who had charge of her bedroom was a slippery-tongued minx named Kezia Pottleberry, and there was nothing that Kezia loved more than gossiping. Miss Jorkaway was not slow to mark this, and down went Kezia's name in her mental note-book. Nor was it difficult to establish confidence in the girl's mind. Nothing was necessary but to let her speak, to show interest in what she said, and to ask a careless question or two; then the flood-gates of Miss Pottleberry's loquacity were opened for weal or woe, and it was sometimes a serious matter to stem the torrent. Scandal of every description, tittle-tattle new and old, comments, opinions, reflections, surmises, anecdotes founded and fabulous, the absurdest fictions and the flimsiest romances, all came pouring out of her mouth in one continuous stream, till even Miss Jorkaway was fain to stop her ears and cry for mercy. In fact, the only way to retain any recollection of what the girl had been saying was to pull her up short

every two sentences, and so prevent her from rambling on to something else. It required both tact and firmness to do this effectively, but Miss Jorkaway was equal to the task, and in a few days she had the girl well in hand. From her she learnt that the cook's name was Bullimore, and that she possessed savings; that, in spite of her five-and-forty years, she was the object of attentions on the part of both Mr. Fowler, the poulterer, and Mr. Williams, the highly respectable butler; that she was as cross and tyrannical as cooks generally are, except after supper and her usual allowance of stout, when she became comparatively amiable; and that she and Virtue Sexton were as jealous of each other as though they had been born ladies. Encouraged to say more upon the subject of Virtue, Kezia expressed her opinion that something must have turned her brain in early life, she was that sour; thought it might have been an overdose of religion, she was that fond of reading hymns and tracts, mostly about the bad place; fancied that very possibly she had committed some awful sin that preyed upon her mind; and confessed that none of them liked to offend Mrs. Sexton, somehow—they were all more or less afraid of her. To a jocular suggestion from her listener that the jealousy between Virtue and Cook Bullimore might not impossibly be connected with the attentions of the two respectable persons above mentioned, Kezia replied, with a shrill titter, that, old as Cook Bullimore was, Mrs. Sexton was nearly old enough to be her mother.

Still, it was undeniably a funny notion, especially as Mrs. Sexton, who had married when quite a girl (so it was said), and had lost her husband shortly afterwards, always expressed the profoundest suspicion and dislike of the male portion of the human race, and was never known to speak civilly to any man she met. The real reason of the jealousy existing between the two women, it appeared, turned on a question of precedence. The cook asserted and enforced her right of supremacy in the servants' hall, and Virtue, her senior both in years and service, resented the cook's airs. She, on the other hand, was treated with marked consideration by the family, and especially by Miss Cynthia, and this Cook Bullimore could not bring herself to forgive. And then Kezia, who had been hurling pillows and blankets about as indefatigably as she had been chattering, came to an end of her work, and wiped her brow with the corner of her lilac cotton apron.

Miss Jorkaway was thereupon seized with a mighty desire to exploit the cook, and see if she could learn anything more from her about Virtue Sexton. Unfortunately, however, that useful person never came upstairs, and Miss Jorkaway was fully alive to the impossibility of interviewing her in the kitchen. What she had picked up from Kezia were trifles and nothing more. Still, trifles, reasoned the astute diplomatist, might often prove very valuable clues, and many trifles added together and fixed into their

proper places often went to form a grand result that was no trifle, as Michael Angelo remarked upon a well-known occasion. Fate, meantime, was kinder to Miss Jorkaway than she deserved. It did not introduce her to the cook, but it afforded her an opportunity of renewing her acquaintance with the mysterious Virtue. One evening, about half-past five o'clock, on going up to her room, she caught sight of a female figure moving silently along a passage, which led to the top of the servants' staircase. As she approached, the figure started and stepped aside, as though to wait in ambush till she had passed. At once she recognised Virtue Sexton. The occasion was too valuable to be missed, and she took advantage of it accordingly.

"Why, is that you?" she said, in a conciliatory tone. "I thought I recognised you. I haven't seen you since the day I first arrived."

The old woman drew herself stiffly together, and inclined her head without speaking. There was a frightened look in her eyes, too, which did not escape Miss Jorkaway.

"You're not often in this part of the house," she continued, determined to extract an answer or know the reason why.

Virtue gave a rapid glance at her, and then looked down again.

"No, miss," she replied in a husky voice. "My work lies elsewhere. I've no business in these rooms, as you know very well yourself."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Miss Jorkaway, starting.

"I ought to beg your pardon, miss, for the words I said to you that day," said Virtue, as though she were repeating a lesson. "Miss Cynthia scolded me, and told me not to come anear you no more. I often says things as I don't rightly mean, and I hope you won't think of it again."

"I'm sure you didn't mean any harm, and I'm very sorry indeed you got into trouble about it," exclaimed Miss Jorkaway with genial energy. "And you've had a great deal of trouble in your life, I'm afraid," she added. "It's made you despondent, and apt to look on the dark side of things. That never does any good, you know. I suppose you're very comfortably situated here, aren't you?"

"Yes, miss; I want for nothing, thank you," replied Virtue. "As to trouble, man's born to it. Some get's more for their share than others, that's all. It's all for the best, no doubt—I don't complain."

"Oh, come," rejoined Miss Jorkaway, beginning to move insidiously towards her room and taking care that Virtue came with her, "that's not the right way to look at things, you know. You shouldn't encourage fancies of that sort. I'm sure you're a great deal better off than thousands of others. What can you want more? Here you are living in a beautiful house, respected by the

whole family, with cheerful society below-stairs, very little to do——"

"Lor, miss, what an innocent one you must be!" broke in Virtue, with a grim laugh. "How much do you know about the society below-stairs, I wonder now?"

"Well," said Miss Jorkaway, "of course I only judge by what I see of the servants myself. They seem a very friendly, pleasant set; take Williams, now—a most excellent person, I should say, and that merry, good-hearted girl Kezia, and Mrs. Bullimore, the cook (though I haven't seen *her*, it's true), and the upper housemaid—what's her name?—the young woman with red cheeks. It seems to me that these are all very worthy people, and you ought to be very happy with them."

By this time they had got inside the room, and Miss Jorkaway was sitting on the edge of her bed. In front of her stood Virtue, square, erect, and grim. She looked the picture of contempt at Miss Jorkaway's description of her fellow-servants.

"You're like all the rest o' the world, miss," she replied sardonically. "You look no further than the outside. What 've I got to do with a giggling hussy dancing along the road to perdition, or a woman like the cook, as is laying up treasure where moth and rust doth corrupt, or the respectable butler with his eye on the cook's pockets? What have I in common with sech as them? You don't understand me, miss, and it's not to be expected as you should. I'm a

woman as has seen affliction by the rod o' God's wrath, and when I cry and shout He shutteth out my prayer. These are not matters as you or any other stranger can meddle with. Let me bear my own burden in silence. You mean well, I don't doubt, but you can do nothing. Better leave me to myself."

Miss Jorkaway, whose notions of religion were confined to what she saw and heard during her very occasional attendance at some frivolous church where the music was distinctly operatic, stared in blank bewilderment at the stern old woman uttering these strange sentences. They conveyed no meaning to her mind, but it was now clearer than ever to her that there was some mystery in Virtue's past, and that mystery she determined if possible to unearth.

"I'm sorry you should be so unhappy, from whatever cause," she said guardedly. "You're right in saying I don't understand you. I suppose that was a quotation from the Bible, or the Prayer-Book, or something of the sort. Of course you know more about such things than I do; but in practical matters of everyday life I have the advantage over you. I've had a great deal of experience, and I've pretty sharp eyes, and I know pretty well what I'm about. I fancy I know human nature as well as most people—better, indeed, because I've made a systematic study of it, which very few other people have. You've already told me that you've had trouble in the past. Before very long you'll tell me what that trouble was.

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Oh yes, you will, and you'll do it of your own accord, too; *I* don't want to pry into your secrets. There's nothing I hate more than gossips and busybodies. But the time will come when you'll confide in *me*, and then we'll see how much of it is real and how much fancy. I believe it's all because you keep yourself so much alone."

"We're none of us ever alone," said Virtue Sexton. "There's someone looking at me over your left shoulder at this very moment."

Miss Jorkaway sprang off the bed with a shriek, and threw herself backwards against the wall, her heart beating fast and her breath coming quick and short.

"What a terrible woman you are!" she exclaimed, with a sort of gasp. "What do you mean? What was it that you saw behind me? Is it there now, or has it gone away?"

"You're easy frightened, miss," replied Virtue, with a solemn sneer. "You say you know the world, but the fact is you only know half of it—the half as you can see. Maybe my eyesight is a bit sharper than yours. There, there, don't take on. There's nothing as need alarm you. Why, bless you, miss, the world's full o' such things, only people don't know it. Even people as reads their Bibles reads 'em with their eyes shut half the time, so it's little to be wondered at if people as never reads 'em at all are blind. And that's just what they are—blind, blind, blind!"

Miss Jorkaway, beginning to recover from her shock, came once more to the conclusion that Virtue Sexton must be a harmless lunatic. Virtue, gazing steadily in front of her, certainly looked as though she could see things hidden from other eyes; there was a rapt, mystical expression in her face, which, combining with its habitual harshness and austerity, gave her almost the appearance of some hard-favoured sibyl, and she seemed for the moment to have forgotten the presence of her companion. At last her features relaxed, and she turned slowly towards Miss Jorkaway.

"Confide in *you?*" she said in measured tones that had almost a contemptuous ring. "No, miss; you mean well, I dare say, but you couldn't understand so much as the alphabet of what you want to know. It takes a many years to learn that, and it's a bitter lesson, believe me. But I've a word for you, nevertheless. There's a danger threatening someone in this house, and it's on your soul to keep it off. I felt it the day you came, and it's got clearer to me since. *Take you good heed o' Cynthia.* There's danger comin' —I don't say trouble; I know nothing about that yet —but there's danger in the air, *danger* I tell you, and if you've got your wits about you, as you say you have, there'll be an opportunity for you to use 'em."

And Virtue fixed her frowning eyes upon Miss Jorkaway so as considerably to disconcert that rash prier into mysteries.

"It's my belief you know something that you

won't tell," exclaimed the governess, almost beside herself with curiosity and excitement. "What possible danger can be threatening that child? Is she going to be poisoned, or kidnapped, or—or what? You can't expect me to place any faith in such visionary warnings unless I know on what they are based. If I am to do anything you must confide in me to some extent, at any rate. Why, good gracious me! one would think we were living in those murderous times the Squire is so fond of talking about. You'd better be more explicit, because I'm bound to find it all out somehow, you know—when once I set myself to run a mystery to earth, I never give it up until I succeed. So now you know what sort of a woman you've got to deal with."

Instead of replying, Virtue crossed her hands upon her bosom and gazed at Miss Jorkaway in a somewhat absent manner, as though her thoughts were straying. Then she said, very slowly and reflectively:

"Pray, miss, do you ever dream?"

"Dream!" echoed Miss Jorkaway, with a start. "What extraordinary questions you do ask, to be sure. Of course I dream sometimes; everybody does."

"And what d'ye dream *about*, now?" continued Virtue.

"Good gracious, how can I tell?" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway. "One dreams of all sorts of things—people, and places, and—and——"

"Ever dream of dead people, as well as live ones?" said Virtue, sinking her voice.

"Sometimes," answered Miss Jorkaway.

"No doubt, no doubt," said Virtue, nodding her head. 'Yes, that's common enough. Most persons dream of the dead, only they never think o' the reason why, and they don't know what it signifies. But there's other dreams, miss, besides dreams about the dead—dreams as are far more fearful, because they're a kind o' warning, like, warnings of dangers to come from some unexpected quarter. Do you never see, in your dreams, miss"—and here the old woman's voice grew deeper and more impressive with every word—"do you never see in your dreams a perfectly distinct figure of someone as you don't know, someone as you've never seen before? Don't you ever dream of *strange faces?* It's natural as one should dream about people one knows, in a way; but to dream about a living being as doesn't exist, leastways that you never saw, and to see the very shape of his body and the colour of his hair, and the look in his eyes—ah! that means something, let me tell you; that means something. The man's alive, though you never met him; he's in the world somewhere, and there's some fate linking you two together. Maybe, the very night you see him in a dream he sees you in dream, and don't know you any more than you know him. 'Tain't given to everybody to understand the interpretation o' dreams, miss, and I don't lay claim to it myself; but I've always been

a great dreamer ever since I was a gell, and I've seldom had a dream as hasn't meant *something*, if only one took the trouble to think it carefully out."

"That's a curious notion," remarked Miss Jorkaway, somewhat awestruck. "But what has it got to do with Cynthia?"

"Hush!" whispered Virtue, raising her finger almost threateningly. "Let me say my say as it comes easiest to me. About seven weeks ago I had a dream o' that sort. I thought I was standing at the lodge-gate yonder all alone, and it was a bright moonlight night, and the road outside was as quiet as the grave. Suddenly I heard footsteps close by, and there came along a bustling, strange-looking woman, with a dark, sharp sort o' face, walking with strides like a man, and wanting to come in at the gate. I barred the way, for I distrusted her looks—she was no beauty, and I'd never seen her before—and then she made a spring forward, and seemed to pass clean through me; but when I turned to look, the woman had disappeared, and there was nothing but her shadow, striding and prancing along up the broad moonlight path all by itself. Then I broke out all over a cold sweat, and woke up struggling; you may say it was a nightmare if you choose, and so it may have been; but sure enough, miss, just one month later *you arrived*."

"Upon—my—word!" ejaculated Miss Jorkaway, turning extremely red. "You're vastly complimentary, I must say! That's the second time

you've been at the pains to tell me what an unfortunately plain person I am. Don't you know that it's abominably rude to make personal remarks like that?"

"Lor, miss, the handsomest of us is nought but dust and rubbish; what does it signify how we're put together?" replied Virtue with calm disdain. "But I haven't done yet. Two nights ago I dreamt again. I thought Cynthia was lost, and I was searching for her in a great dim twilight sort o' forest—up hill and down dale, on and on for ever, and not a glimpse of her could I get. But every now and then I heard a kind o' low laugh behind me, and whenever I turned round I always saw the figure of a man between the trees, skulking like, and mocking me, and always standing so as I never once caught sight of his face. A youngish man he looked, with light hair, but no face—none, I mean, as I could see—and I felt somehow that he knew where Cynthia was, and was just preventing her from being found. Well, miss, you mark my words—that man will turn up here some day, and I shall know him again for all he hid his face from me in my dream, and then you must be on the look-out. He's a man with a bad past, and may work ruin to us all—he's got no conscience—he calls evil good and good evil—and as soon as he and Cynthia sets eyes on one another——"

"Virtue Sexton, I believe you're out of your mind!" exclaimed her listener. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself for indulging in such superstitions.

People can't help dreaming, of course, and I don't say you're to blame on that score; but some people's dreams, apparently, can be excessively offensive and impertinent as regards *other* people, and then the best thing they can do is just to keep them to themselves. I don't place the slightest faith in your predictions, which seem to me unutterably absurd. The very idea that the arrival of a person like myself"—and here Miss Jorkaway drew herself up proudly—"was foreshadowed by your dream of a hideous midnight hag who jumped through you in the moonlight and then disappeared, proves of itself what nonsense the whole thing is. And really, if I thought that you were entirely free from—from—illusions, I should be seriously offended. However, we'll say no more about that part of the business; while as to the other——"

"Wouldn't you believe me if the man were really to come?" interrupted Virtue.

"How could I tell whether he was the dream-man or not?" retorted the other sharply.

"You'd have to rely on me to point the right one out to you," said Virtue, "and then watch *him*. There's company coming in a week or two, I'm told?"

Miss Jorkaway signified assent.

"Wait till they're all here, then," replied Virtue, "and take you heed of the man as I point out. I shall make no mistake. I can't see into your heart, miss, and I don't know whether you are good or bad;

but I do know as you're in that position here as you can do what others can't do, because as Cynthia's governess you've always a right to look after her and speak to her when necessary. And when the time comes——"

"Yes, yes, you may rely on me," interrupted Miss Jorkaway, whose detective instincts now came again to the fore. The slight to her vanity offered by the imperturbable old woman was now passing off, and her interest in the campaign before her rose rapidly. She felt, indeed, somewhat self-contemptuous for having allowed her resentment to obscure, if only for a moment, the splendid prospect of mystery-mongering opened out to her by Virtue; and though, to do her justice, she had but small faith in that phase of the supernatural which lies in dreams, portents, auguries, and the interpretation thereof, it seemed to her that a new attraction had been added to the arrival of the expected guests. One of them, at any rate, would come invested with a ready-made mystery all his own; and hers be it to penetrate the enigma to its core!

Absorbed in these reflections, Miss Jorkaway walked excitedly to the further end of the room; and when she turned to walk back again, her eyes shining with excitement and her mouth open ready to continue the discussion, she found to her discomfiture that she was alone. The room was empty. Virtue Sexton had suddenly and noiselessly disappeared.

CHAPTER VI.

A MAN OF INTELLECT.

THE phrase "pursuit of pleasure," as has been well remarked, is elliptical, the object of pursuit being a definite something that we desire, the possession of which will cause pleasure, subjectively, in ourselves. But most writers on psychology and ethics agree that the means and the end are not always clearly differentiated—that is, that the very pursuit of a pleasure-giving object is often highly pleasurable *per se;* that mere achievement of one's aim, apart from the object pursued, is pleasurable too, the excitement of the chase and the capture of the fox constituting two distinct pleasures of themselves; so that when the ultimate object is also of a pleasure-producing or useful nature (which a dead fox most certainly is not) the pleasures derived from a successful enterprise are exactly three in number. These are, of course, all divisible into many component parts; ingredients, in fact, each producing a certain pleasurable sensation, among which (and here we are at one with Dr. Bain)

uncertainty holds an important place, as increasing the interest and excitement. And the highest form of uncertainty, says he, is Mystery, whose charm is due to the ideal chase that it opens up. Miss Jorkaway, it is true, had never heard of Dr. Bain; but she afforded, all unwittingly, an excellent example of many of that ingenious philosopher's propositions, much as the unconscious frog exemplifies reflex action in some of its most startling forms, and thereby gives encouragement to the sagacious advocates of the automatic theory.

Now in justice to Miss Jorkaway it should be acknowledged that the pleasures she both sought and derived from her many enterprises were those of pursuit and of achievement only. The former were habitual to her; she was always more or less upon the chase; the latter were but rare, the objects of her pursuit existing for the most part chiefly in her imagination. In no case, however, did she pursue her fox because she loved foxes, or was anxious to realize a sum of money from its brush; it was the spying and the prying that she loved; the formulation of theories about other people, the analysis of their motives and their deeds, the verification of her own hypotheses, and the discovery of matters that did not concern her in the least—these were the breath of her life. Of course she was misinterpreted. The general impression in the boarding-house world was that she was an inveterate husband-hunter growing desperate. Judging by their

own standards, these critics are not to be severely blamed for their mistake; it was natural enough—for them. At any rate, if she were a husband-hunter she was rather a clumsy one. There were times, it is true, when she would seem to make a dead set at some particular man; and then she would banter him in a fearsomely sportive way, romping about him with nods, and leers, and dreadful smiles, insist on his playing draughts with her when he wanted to go out and smoke, assume the existence of some confidential understanding between them in the presence of all the other boarders, send ocular telegrams to him across the dinner-table, waylay him in his walks, profess an affectionate interest in his female relatives, and take possession of him generally. But to interpret such ungainly performances as intended to win the affections of the victim would surely be a very shallow judgment. They usually exasperated him to such a pitch as to provoke open and very candid protest, and sometimes flat rebellion; and whenever this occurred it was always the man who got the sympathy, while Miss Jorkaway was dubbed a baggage. No; it is impossible that she can have been a husband-hunter, though these occasional ebullitions were, it must be confessed, not readily explainable on other grounds. She may have been simply amusing herself; she may have had some deeper aim in view. It is not easy to decide. But no woman who really wanted to land her prey would dream of exposing it to the terrifying

demonstrations which made the very name of Jorkaway a danger-signal from afar.

And yet she would have been either more or less than woman had the interest with which she looked forward to the arrival of the expected guests been untinctured with a personal element. There are such wonderful possibilities in the unknown. And who could tell? Among those guests there might be one, at any rate, in whose eyes she herself might appear in an interesting, if not attractive, light, especially with the light behind her. But all that, of course, was premature. Such contingencies formed no part of the plot she had in hand. For the present all that concerned her was the detection of this mysterious foe of Cynthia's, the fair-haired, hidden-faced fiend of Virtue's dream. Further developments would no doubt come in time, and she would be equal to them, never fear. She was not at all the person to shut her eyes to the main chance should it happen to turn up; she was only not on the look-out for it just then.

About a week after this Mrs. Cherryfield began to be very busy. Bedrooms were turned topsy-turvy and dusted from floor to ceiling, sheets were aired, curtains taken down and hung up again, and preparations of all sorts went forward with a mighty bustle. Even Nora curtailed her hours of study in order to superintend some of the arrangements; while Cynthia flitted about as brisk and busy as a bee, and Miss Jorkaway, taking her cue from

the others, plunged into the very thick of it with a will. It was a point of honour with Mrs. Cherryfield always to see after the comfort of her guests in person. To leave such a matter to servants would have been a repudiation of one of the first principles of hospitality, a neglect of all true housewifely ethics; and so she dived into linen-closets, and invaded store-rooms, and explored the butler's pantry, sorting tablecloths and giving out forks and spoons in a way that considerably surprised the new governess. But it was when she followed Cynthia into the wine-cellars, and was initiated into the mysteries of top right-hand bins, gold labels, and blue and yellow seals, that Miss Jorkaway got most excited. This was really an adventure. The dark underground galleries, festooned with cobwebs and laden with the scent of must, appealed vividly to her imagination; and as she peered about and picked her way between the interminable stacks of bottles, her skirts held well up behind and her feet treading gingerly to avoid the toads and snakes she was sure infested the dungeon, Miss Jorkaway quite considered herself a sort of female Monte Cristo.

The Crotchetts were to arrive first—three days, in fact, before any of the others. This was on account of their being obliged to leave the friends they had been visiting rather earlier than they expected, Mrs. Cherryfield refusing to hear of their taking the long journey to their own house and back meantime, when they might just as well come on

to her at once. It was shortly after five o'clock on a bright, hot afternoon that the sound of their carriage-wheels was heard approaching the house along the avenue, and Miss Jorkaway could not resist the temptation of putting her head out of the window to get a premature glimpse. All she managed to see, however, was a rather dusty hat side by side with a red sunshade large enough to screen the holder of it entirely from view, a result which scarcely lent itself to any special theory about the guests themselves. Then came a loud ring, followed by the inevitable skirmishing of greetings exchanged in the hall, a tumult of voices all talking at the same time, a general move in the direction of the corridor, subdued murmurs, and then silence.

Miss Jorkaway forthwith shook out her skirts, cast a critical glance at herself in the mirror, and went boldly downstairs to dispense the tea. This was a duty the relegation of which to another person did not conflict with Mrs. Cherryfield's notions of hospitality; and Miss Jorkaway, never readier to perform it than on the present occasion, found the tray just being brought up and the entire party assembled in the cool, dim, spacious drawing-room in expectation of it. Her arrival, as it happened, was most opportune. Without announcing her presence or obtruding herself in any way, she just slipped quietly into her place and took possession of the cups while everybody else was talking. No post of observation could have been better; she saw everyone

and heard everything without the slightest embarrassment or restraint.

Sir Thomas Crotchett was a tall and rather portly man, whose chief features were a bald head fringed with reddish-gray hair, a lipless mouth, and a pair of thick short whiskers of very formal cut. His baldness gave him an intellectual air—at least, people generally thought so—and when he knitted his heavy eyebrows and relapsed into judicious silence he looked as if he were very deep in thought indeed. In fact, no inconsiderable amount of Sir Thomas's reputation for learning was due to this habit of plunging every now and then into what was believed to be a profound intellectual trance, a sort of Buddhist *samadhi*, during which his mind was engrossed with problems of the abstrusest nature, quite beyond the grasp of ordinary persons, such as you and I. Occasionally, it is true, Sir Thomas would unbend, and talk of everyday affairs; nay, he had been known even to utter a Ciceronian jest or two. But his very playfulness had a weight and a severity about it which forbade the slightest advantage being taken of his condescension. There was something very impenetrable in the learning of Sir Thomas Crotchett. No one quite knew what it was; but he was believed to have made some most remarkable discoveries with regard to the origin of language, the elucidation of nature-myths as preserved in nursery tales, and the evolution of architecture, tracing the house back to the tent, the tent to the umbrella, and the umbrella to the common

mushroom. It was in a pamphlet on "The Differentiation of Dialects, B.C. 2247"—the Babel affair, to wit—that Sir Thomas had crushed and pulverized once and for all the preposterous assertion of Professor Dunderhead that the primitive vocable *pzd* was originally written *pdz*, proving (and defying the Professor to contradict him) that the accepted orthography in pre-Babel days was neither *pzd* nor *pdz*, but *dzp*. It was in another pamphlet, equally crushing and even more conclusive, that Sir Thomas had tracked the incomparable nature-myth of the "four-and-twenty blackbirds baked in a pie" to its earliest home on the banks of the river Yenisei (B.C. 2968), and, in a brilliant chapter on "Fox-myths," had, for the first time, told the true story of Guy Faux. "We are all familiar," wrote Sir Thomas in his most popular vein, "with the myth of the Fox and the Grapes; and that the hero of the so-called Gunpowder Plot was a fox and nothing else can be proved beyond a doubt. Indeed, as I shall show, the very name betrays his Aryan origin. In Grimm's Laws we find the Sanscrit word *gye*, a cow. Now, a cow may be a bull; there is no reason why, for our present purpose, this cow should *not* be a bull. This gives us *Gye* fox, or Bull fox—a mixture of stubbornness and cunning. Further, we have the Sanscrit *ghagh*. This means wily, artful, sly—in a word, foxy. Here, then, we have *Ghagh* fox, the foxy-fox, the doubly-cunning fox; and from this comes our own Guy Faux, the humanized impersona-

tion of treachery." It need scarcely be said, after this, that Sir Thomas was a formidable linguist; a fact, indeed, implied by the startling exclamation of Lady Crotchett on a certain occasion when some young persons were chatting away together during one of the frowning trances already mentioned. "Hush!" breathed her ladyship in a stage whisper. "You mustn't disturb Sir Thomas. He's thinking in seven languages!"

As for Lady Crotchett herself, good woman, she was not at all learned, and did not pretend to be. But what she lacked in learning she made up in romance. A stoutly-built elderly lady, with a large, plain, drab face and somewhat heavy features, she was as romantic as any miss of seventeen; more so, indeed, than is often the case with youthful misses in these advanced and calculating days. She adored Sir Thomas with all the ardour of a first love; to her he was the embodiment of everything good and great and erudite and noble; his prejudices were her laws, his sciolisms her dogmas, his pedantries her standard of good taste, his wishes her categorical imperative. And the eternal fitness of this devotion was rendered all the more manifest by the fact—the undeniable and stubborn fact—that, incredible as it may appear, Sir Thomas was not regarded as highly as he deserved to be by scientific men; there were even those who went so far as to impugn, nay to ridicule, some of his most epoch-making discoveries; while the number of scientific papers that ignored him alto-

gether was most unaccountably large. Having, then, no voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet among those who should have been the first to praise him, Sir Thomas was fain to content himself with the consciousness of his own profundity, and the unchangeable devotion of his wife; and as neither of them was in the habit of doing things by halves, it can scarcely be said that his noble rage was repressed for lack of homage. To Lady Crotchett, if to no one else, he was the very wisest, dearest, greatest, handsomest of men.

Hugh, the third of the Crotchett party, was a misfit. The word sprang unconsciously to Miss Jorkaway's lips as she turned her eyes upon him, and no word could have been more appropriate. He was a heavily-built, clumsy youth, with a louring expression of face, thick dark eyebrows, a strong black beard which made him look years older than his real age, a coarse mouth, and very slouching manners. His general appearance suggested low birth partly counteracted by familiarity with refined surroundings. There was no intellect, and not very much intelligence, in his features, and, though he was dressed expensively and in accordance with the prevailing mode, his clothes were badly put on, and looked out of place upon his ungainly limbs. Miss Jorkaway watched him with curiosity as he sat leaning forward, in an awkward attitude, with his teacup in his hand, talking to Cynthia. A veritable Orson, truly, ill disguised as a gentleman. His manners to

the girl were familiar; evidently the two were on easy terms—ease which, on Cynthia's side, seemed born of pure indifference. She was listening to him good-humouredly enough, but without making the slightest show of interest in what he said. Then Nora offered to pass his cup for some more tea.

"No, thanks," Hugh said abruptly. "I'm not quite so fond of it as all that. Who's the lady?"

This inquiry was made in a somewhat lower tone, with a sideway jerk of his head in the direction of Miss Jorkaway.

"That is my governess," replied Cynthia. "I will introduce you later on."

"Governess, eh?" exclaimed Hugh, opening his eyes. "Why, I thought you'd done with all that sort of thing long ago!"

"On the contrary, I'm only just beginning all that sort of thing," said Cynthia. "Of course, your education is complete?"

"Rather," he returned, with a knowing look. "They wanted to send me to Oxford; but what would have been the good? I can do all I want to do, and what I don't know I pick up as I go along. If a fellow can read, write, and reckon, and has got his wits about him, that's enough for all practical purposes, it seems to me."

"And what do you call practical purposes?" asked Cynthia as she put down her cup.

"Just now it's making a book on the Oaks," said Hugh succinctly.

"My young relative, you see," put in Sir Thomas with a blandly pompous air, "identifies himself with the utilitarian rather than with the decorative view of acquirements. Such knowledge as has only a speculative or academic bearing on the pursuits of life he somewhat undervalues, thereby practising an intellectual economy which, rightly exercised, is not inconsistent with the achievement of certain results. The general principle is not only defensible but excellent, though it may be applied with too little discrimination and on too large a scale."

Hugh grinned; and Lady Crotchett observed, comfortably:

"That's the philosophy of it, you see. Sir Thomas always puts things so clearly, my dear"—turning to Mrs. Cherryfield—"that what sounds absolutely shocking from another person turns out to be quite respectable when he explains it in his own way. I'm not learned myself, but Sir Thomas, as I've often said, has learning enough for all three of us."

Sir Thomas cleared his throat, settled his chin in his shirt-collar, and looked complacent. Nora and Cynthia tried hard not to smile, and Mrs. Cherryfield drummed with her foot upon the floor. For a minute or two no one spoke.

"May I give you some more tea, Mrs. Cherryfield?" said Miss Jorkaway at last, by way of creating a diversion.

"Oh, Miss Jorkaway—a thousand pardons,"

exclaimed that goodnatured lady with a little start. "I entirely forgot to introduce you. Lady Crotchett, this is Miss Jorkaway, who has only joined our circle during the last few weeks. She is superintending Cynthia in a course of philosophical reading. Tell Lady Crotchett, Cynthia, what books you are studying, and how far you have got in them."

Cynthia prudently affected deafness, and Lady Crotchett acknowledged Miss Jorkaway's dignified bend with a very affable little bow. Sir Thomas, deeming himself included in the introduction, bowed too, but in a much statelier style.

"The direction of a budding mind in its attempts to trace the devious paths of ancient and modern speculation," he said oracularly, "is a task, the honourable character of which is only equalled by its high responsibility. Honour, therefore, is due to both the teacher and the taught; while the obligations of both are the same. And so you are studying philosophy. Now what, Cynthia, strikes you as the most salient characteristic of the literature of the New Academy?"

"The New Academy," repeated Cynthia, taken aback. "I don't think I know it. How long has it been open?"

"I stand corrected," acknowledged Sir Thomas. "I should have been more explicit. I was referring, not to any modern seminary, but to the school of Arcesilaus and Carneades, which succeeded the stoicism of Zeno. The theories of these philosophers

were somewhat abstruse, but your acquaintance with Cicero and Horace will no doubt have familiarized you with the more prominent features of the system."

"I never even heard of it," said Cynthia rather shortly.

"Then your researches have no doubt lain in more practical directions," replied Sir Thomas. "The speculations of metaphysics are, after all, doomed to sterility, there being no objective verities by which they can be tested. You evidently prefer physical science or political history. I must compliment your erudite instructress upon the judicious nature of the course she is pursuing. The particular department——"

"I'll show you the books I'm reading to-morrow, if you like, Sir Thomas," interrupted Cynthia in a hurry. "I can't bear being examined in public, and I'm not at all so learned as you seem to think."

"That remark shows both modesty and candour," observed Sir Thomas. "My dear Cherryfield, Cynthia does credit to your training. No one could mistake her for anything but the daughter of a philosopher."

"My training!" exclaimed the Squire. "I've never trained the child at all."

"Your example, then," said Sir Thomas, quite unabashed. "The best training, in my opinion, that a father can give his child,"

The Squire subsided, leaving Sir Thomas in possession of the field. Hugh, meanwhile, had been conversing in an undertone with Nora, making an unsuccessful effort every now and then to suppress a yawn. Mrs. Cherryfield now came to the rescue with a proposal that her guests should repair to their rooms to refresh themselves after their journey, and a general move was the result.

"Ah, I shall feel all the better for a tub," remarked Hugh, as he prepared to follow the others. "I'm a bit out of condition just now—been putting on too much flesh, you know. If ever you go into training——"

"Miss Jorkaway, let me present Mr. Hugh Crotchett," said Cynthia, as that erudite lady approached. The others had all left the room.

"Eh? Oh, beg pardon—delighted, I'm sure!" muttered Hugh awkwardly, as he acknowledged the introduction.

The lady bowed, and darted a searching look at him. There was a bold, vulgar handsomeness in the youth's face which interested while it repelled her. So he was not the son of Sir Thomas after all—only a "young relative." A completer contrast to the worthy pair could scarcely be imagined, and she longed to find out all about him. What could be the actual tie between the two?

There was, however, nothing to say, and they all moved across the hall towards the staircase, Miss Jorkaway coming last. Hugh lingered a moment or

two, glancing here and there at the carvings and tapestries upon the walls.

"Curious old things, those," he remarked. "I wonder how long it is since they were dusted? They'd look all the better if you were to take them out into the garden and give them a good beating, same as you do carpets, you know. Why don't you have some jolly coloured pictures about instead of those old mats?'

One of the women servants was standing by, and curtseyed as they passed. Hugh threw her a careless nod, and then, without waiting for a reply to his criticisms, bounded heavily upstairs. Cynthia and Nora followed at a more leisurely rate, leaving Miss Jorkaway below. She turned, and found herself face to face with Virtue Sexton.

"Who's that young man?" asked Virtue, with a curious expression in her eyes.

"That is Mr. Hugh Crotchett," replied Miss Jorkaway affably. "He arrived with Sir Thomas and Lady Crotchett about half an hour ago."

"Mr. Hugh Crotchett!" repeated Virtue, with a perplexed frown. "Their son, I suppose?"

"No; only a distant relative," said Miss Jorkaway.

"A distant relative," repeated Virtue again. "That's queer. Not their son—only a distant relative. How distant, now, I wonder?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Miss Jorkaway. "You seem very curious about him. What new

fancy have you got into your head? You never saw him before, did you?"

"Not as I remember," answered Virtue guardedly. "Ah, he's got a fine face—one doesn't see a face like that every day. There's something familiar to me about it, too. I'd like to look at him again."

"Well, there certainly *is* no accounting for tastes!" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway, with a derisive laugh. "What in the world can you see to admire in him? You are a strange creature, Virtue. I should have thought a rough, common young man of that sort would have been the very last person in the world to interest you. Nobody else admires him, I'm pretty sure of that."

"Maybe not," said the old woman, nodding her head mysteriously. "I see things different from other folks, and there's something about him as pleases me. How long are they going to stay?"

"Really I don't know," replied Miss Jorkaway, beginning to move upstairs. "Long enough for you to see him a score of times if you want to, I dare say. Just tell Kezia to bring me some hot water in about half an hour, will you?"

So saying, the governess disappeared, revolving schemes of toilet in her resourceful mind. The arrival of a baronet and his wife not only justified but required a more than usually smart bedeckment for the solemnity of dinner. Virtue, however, did not hurry herself to transmit Miss Jorkaway's order

to Kezia, but remained standing for some minutes where she was.

"Crotchett—never heard the name before," she muttered, with a puzzled look. "But he's got a fine face—a beautiful face. I've seen the like of it somewhere, years agone. Eh, but my memory's a bad one! I'll look for him again, and get to speak to him if I can; perhaps it'll come back to me—perhaps I'll dream about it, and get to know it that way. But Crotchett! No, I never heard the name."

Then she roused herself from her reverie, and went slowly down into the kitchen to her work.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FAIR AMELIA.

THE peculiarities of the Crotchett family were sufficiently marked to afford Miss Jorkaway plenty of amusement during the next few days. Sir Thomas was evidently a man worth studying. His habit of idealizing the crude remarks of other people came, she thought, dangerously near to something that might be called gross flattery; but it might, again, be no more than the natural bent of his mind, and Miss Jorkaway, having more than once been presented with a fascinating paraphrase of some of her own rather hackneyed reflections, favoured this more charitable interpretation. Both he and the Squire sometimes talked over the heads of their auditors; but the Squire did so from sheer absent-mindedness, which was often rather embarrassing, while Sir Thomas had a delightful way of making everybody appear as learned as he was himself. And particularly was this the case with regard to Hugh. Whenever that slow-witted and uninteresting youth hazarded an observation of more than usual philis-

tinism, Sir Thomas immediately took it up, put it into philosophical language, illustrated it by some ethical or metaphysical theory, and gave it a respectable appearance forthwith. It seemed, indeed, to Miss Jorkaway that Sir Thomas had a special object in doing this—it even looked as though he were trying to shield Hugh, and represent him in a favourable light; for Sir Thomas was a sensitive man, as Mrs. Cherryfield had said, and Hugh was closely associated with him, and must be protected against his own boobyisms at all costs.

But what amused Miss Jorkaway more even than the pedantries of Sir Thomas, and the confiding admiration of my lady, was the extraordinary interest in Hugh displayed by Virtue Sexton. Gradually and systematically the strange old woman constituted herself the medium through which all the youth's small comforts were conveyed to him. It was she who took him up the laced seltzer-water with which he began the day, who saw that his bath was always ready at a moment's notice, who kept his room in the most perfect order, who even cleaned his dirty pipes for him, and anticipated his every caprice. At first Hugh did not notice this untiring devotion. He was simply conscious that a grim-looking elderly person was generally hanging about, and that he was extremely well looked after. But eventually the thing struck him, and, hearing from the old woman that she was in a sense the special property of Cynthia, whose orders it was her duty to execute,

credited that young lady with being the instigator of her attentions. This, of course, implied a very friendly interest on the part of Cynthia in himself; and Hugh felt complacently assured that such an interest was simply another name for a much warmer feeling. He therefore treated Virtue with considerable good humour and familiarity; while she, encouraged in her advances, lost much of that harshness and asperity which formed the normal characteristic of her face.

The arrival of fresh guests was now daily expected, and Hugh, who had begun to feel somewhat bored, evinced much interest in the prospect.

"We have some more people coming this afternoon," Cynthia said to him after breakfast on the morning of the third day. "I'm afraid you've been shockingly dull hitherto, with no one but Nora and me. However, we shall have quite a houseful now."

"Oh, I've made it out well enough," replied Hugh carelessly, as he stuffed his pipe. They were in the garden, where smoking was always permissible. "It isn't half a bad sort o' place, this—Liberty Hall, and all that sort o' thing. It does a man good to loaf round a bit. And that old woman of yours is the best valet I ever had."

"That old woman of mine!" exclaimed Cynthia. "What old woman?"

"Why, the grim old party that cleans my pipes and does the Ganymede business, you know," said Hugh. "*I* don't know her name, but she's always

around. Seems to take a good deal of interest in me, somehow."

Hugh cast a side glance at Cynthia as he said this, as though to intimate that he knew very well whose interest in him was really at the back of Virtue's assiduities.

"How very unaccountable!" remarked Cynthia, much amused. "You must mean Virtue Sexton. I'm glad she makes herself useful. She doesn't often take to people at first sight."

"Ah!" said Mr. Hugh complacently. "She told me whom she belonged to, as it were. Well, it isn't thrown away upon me, you understand."

Cynthia opened her eyes in the frankest astonishment at this extraordinary remark, the insinuation contained in which did not at first strike her. Then it gradually became clear to her mind that, in some confused way, her polished guest was attributing to her a preference for himself that showed itself in vicarious devotion to his comforts. The notion was so extravagantly ridiculous that she had much ado to keep herself from laughing outright in his face. Quietly turning the conversation, she asked him in an indifferent tone what he was going to do with himself before lunch.

"I think I'll just loaf down to the station, and see if I can pick up a sporting paper," Hugh said meditatively. "Will you come, too?"

"I? Oh, well——" said Cynthia, rather taken aback. "I'm afraid I can't; there are so many things

I have to do this morning. Here comes Nora. Perhaps she'll go with you. Nora, do you want a walk?"

Hugh frowned, but of course said nothing. Nora now approached the two, holding a letter in her hand.

"Mother's just got this," she said, giving it to Cynthia. "It's from Amelia Walker. She's coming by the 12.30, and will be here in time for lunch."

"Oh, how jolly!" exclaimed Cynthia, glancing rapidly through the note. "There, Mr. Crotchett, what do you say to that? I think I *must* make time to go and meet Amelia, and then you'll be able to get your sporting paper too. That'll be a capital plan. We won't drive, we'll walk, and get her boxes and things sent up by one of the station porters. How glad I am she's coming!"

"You don't know Miss Walker, I suppose?" asked Nora, turning to Hugh.

"No," he answered. "What's she like?"

"She's the dearest, sweetest creature that ever lived!" replied Cynthia before Nora could reply. "I'm sure you'll like her immensely. You can fall in love with her if you choose—she won't mind. And she's *ever* so rich, you know. Why, now I come to think of it, she's the very person for you: not too clever, but as jolly as they make 'em, and always game for anything. We'll walk down to the station together and meet her."

Hugh, rather sore at Cynthia for having at first

tried to put him off, was not proof against the attractions of this plan. His imagination was also fired by her description of this wonderful Amelia, and he swallowed the bait at once.

"By George!" he exclaimed with interest. "Just the sort of girl I like. Is she pretty?"

"Pretty?" repeated Cynthia critically. "Well, that's always a risky question to ask one woman about another, you know. We are such jealous creatures. What do you think, Nora? Should you call Amelia pretty?"

"H'm—pretty is not *quite* the word, perhaps," answered Nora, with great demureness. "But she's so animated, so playful——" .

"And dances so perfectly," interposed Cynthia.

"And has such admirable taste in dress!" added Nora.

"And is so gloriously rich!" cried Cynthia as a climax.

"By George!" exclaimed Hugh again. "She must be a regular paradox—I mean—what the deuce is the word? Para— something. I mean a stunner. I'm awfully anxious to see her."

"You've described her exactly," exclaimed Cynthia, in uncontrollable laughter. "No word could be more suitable. Amelia is a born paradox. Come, Nora, I've lots to do. We'll start about half-past eleven, Mr. Crotchett, if you can restrain your ardour for so long. I'll meet you in the hall, and you can

make yourself as irresistible as you please meanwhile."

So saying she turned away in the direction of the house with Nora, leaving Hugh to enjoy the pleasures of anticipation at leisure. Rough and awkward as he was, he possessed a vein of sentiment (or what did duty as such) curiously out of harmony with his uncultivated tastes, and was by no means proof against the attractions of the fair. The impending arrival of a young, rich, beautiful heiress excited his imagination, and for the moment threw even Cynthia into the shade. He pictured her to himself as a somewhat high-coloured blonde—he couldn't bear dark women—with big blue eyes, a good seat on horseback, and no nonsense; by which he meant no prudery, no airs, no punctilio, no stiffness, and no scholarship, all which attributes he regarded as detracting from the charms of the most beautiful. It was true that both Cynthia and Nora had hesitated to describe their friend as pretty, but, then, as Cynthia had acknowledged, women are jealous creatures, and standards of beauty are by no means all the same. Yes, Amelia was no doubt a charming girl, and if she were only heart-whole, so as to give his powers of fascination their full play, Hugh made up his mind to enter the lists for her favour, and secure both her blue eyes and the *beaux yeux de sa cassette* at one throw.

"Yet it's a rum start, Cynthia throwing her at my head in this way," he muttered, as he lounged about

the shrubbery. "What can she be up to, I wonder? I must be on the look-out, else I may get myself into a mess. Women are kittle cattle, all said and done. But she won't find it so easy to get the measure of *my* foot—not by any manner of means."

At this moment Hugh heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and, glancing up, recognised the figure of Miss Jorkaway. She was carrying an immense bunch of flowers that she had been picking for table decorations, and as she walked along under her fragrant burden she sang and chirruped to herself in a way that was quite touching in its artlessness.

'Tra-la-la, tra-la-la, tra-la-la," warbled Miss Jorkaway blithely. "Good gracious, Mr. Crotchett, how you startled me! I hadn't an idea you were there. What, meditating in solitude? What have you done with Cynthia?"

"I haven't done anything with her," said Hugh. "She's gone indoors."

"Gone indoors—this heavenly day?" exclaimed the governess. "How could you let her, Mr. Crotchett? You must have driven her away. You don't know how to make the best use of your opportunities. What a charming girl she is!"

"Oh yes—awfully," replied Hugh.

"Quite the life and soul of the house," continued Miss Jorkaway. "I suppose you've known them all some years?"

"Oh yes," said Hugh again. "But I was never here before."

"Really!" exclaimed the lady. "That's curious, now. They're quite old friends of Sir Thomas and Lady Crotchett, I believe. Do you live far from here? Where is Sir Thomas's place?"

"We live in London," replied Hugh; "Regent's Park, you know. I suppose you know where that is?"

"Indeed I do," said Miss Jorkaway with enthusiasm. "I dote on London, though of course this sort of thing is pleasant enough for a change. It's a pity, I think, that the Cherryfields never go up to town. The girls ought to be presented and brought out in the regular way. But Mrs. Cherryfield is quite devoted to a country life, and the Squire cares for nothing but his books. I don't know what will become of Nora and Cynthia, I'm sure."

"Why, what should become of 'em?" asked Hugh.

"Ah, Mr. Crotchett, you don't understand these matters," said Miss Jorkaway, stooping down to add a great blush-rose to her collection. "What I mean is that it's time they were thinking of getting married, and a season or two in London would be just the thing. In fact, I believe it's considered quite indispensable for girls of their position in society. They see very little company down here, and it's not fair to them—not fair by any means. Girls ought to have more opportunities, you know. There are not half a dozen eligible men within twenty

miles, I assure you, and we scarcely ever see anything even of them. No, I really do not think it's right."

"But they get other people to stay with 'em," remarked Hugh. "They're getting a lot in now."

"Ah, but how many of those would be suitable?" asked Miss Jorkaway, darting a glance at him.

She had led the conversation up to the point she had been aiming at. Was Hugh attracted by Cynthia? That was the question she desired to solve. She did not care for the mere outside of a puppet-show; she liked to look behind and see what was pulling the different strings.

"Depends upon what you call suitable," remarked Hugh, puffing meditatively at his pipe. "Girls may have their own ideas about that, you know; and when they begin to like a man they generally contrive to let him know it. All the same, it's curious they should go out o' their way to invite other girls who may interfere with their own game. Do you know this Miss Walker who's coming here to-day?"

"No, not at all," replied Miss Jorkaway with interest. "What of her?"

"She's said to be something out o' the common," said Hugh, with assumed carelessness. "Tremendously rich, as jolly as you please, up to everything, a splendid dancer, and all the rest of it. Amelia her name is. The girls are wild about her. Cynthia and I are going down to the station to meet her later on. She's coming in time for lunch."

This was great news to Miss Jorkaway. A young, rich, beautiful heiress could scarcely fail to play an important part in any domestic drama, and her interest in the new arrival rose high.

"How delightful!" she exclaimed. "I adore heiresses"—not that she had ever known any—"and here in the country one sees so few interesting persons. Who are her people? Where does she come from? Do her father and mother accompany her?"

"I don't know a word more than I've told you," replied Hugh.

"Well, Mr. Crotchett, you're highly favoured; you're to be the first to see her," said Miss Jorkaway. "I'd give anything to be in your shoes. Of course we shall all be cast into the shade for ever. But you must be merciful, you know. It won't do to let poor Cynthia feel the difference too much just at first, will it now?"

This sportive sally made Hugh blush and look sheepish.

"What nonsense!" he muttered, with an ill-repressed grin. "I suppose you mean that for chaff. Why should Cynthia take any notice either way?"

"Ah, why indeed?" retorted Miss Jorkaway, in a rallying tone. "Never mind, Mr. Crotchett; Cynthia's a sensible girl as well as a very charming one, and she knows what she's about. You do like her, don't you?"

"Rather," replied Hugh, with emphasis.

"Well, I must go in now," said the diplomatist. "I have all these flowers to arrange, and Mrs. Cherryfield will be wondering what has become of me. Aren't these geraniums splendid? I think nothing looks so well on a dinner-table as plenty of fine vivid scarlet. *Au revoir*—we meet again at lunch. I hope you won't have quite lost your heart to the heiress in the meantime."

"But what do you mean about Cynthia?" said Hugh, with a puzzled frown.

"*Au revoir*, Mr. Crotchett," replied Miss Jorkaway, frisking away down a side path. "Oh dear, how late it is!"

"But I say——"

"Tra-la-la, tra-la-la, tra-la-la," warbled the frolicsome lady as she disappeared.

Hugh stood scratching his head and looking uneasily after her.

"Provoking creature," he muttered. "Deuced fine woman, though. Sharp, too. What the dickens does she mean? I must get it out of her somehow; won't do to raise expectations, and all that, before I've made up my mind. Yet she's a slap-up girl, Cynthia. Mightn't be a bad thing to make her a bit jealous, just to see how the land lies. And the arrival of Amelia comes just in the nick of time."

He had already begun to think of the heiress as Amelia *tout court*, looking upon his conquest as

almost an accomplished fact. For the next half-hour he lounged about the grounds, smoking his everlasting pipe, and then began to think it was about time to go indoors to make himself irresistible —as Cynthia had suggested. And a very careful toilet he made. First he put on a pair of bran-new trousers, with an extremely conspicuous pattern; then an alarming pink shirt-collar, terribly stiff, and nearly three inches high, which cut his ears and held his head as in a vice; then a voluminous white silk scarf, which made his coarse complexion coarser than ever by contrast, adorned with a death's-head pin; and finally a round black yachting-jacket, shorter even than the bandit's tunic patronized by Mr. Tupman—for that had a two-inch tail. Hugh surveyed himself in a pier-glass when his task was finished, and honestly thought that he looked beautiful. Every article he had on was in the very latest style, and so far beyond criticism; while the entire effect was pervaded by a subtle something that made it characteristic of the wearer, and imparted an air of originality to his appearance that could not be overlooked. It was intended, in fact, to say to the heiress: "Well, this is what I am; take good view of me, and make no mistake, and if you're the girl I take you for you can't deny that I'm worth your admiration."

Whether the somewhat startled glance that Cynthia gave him when they met downstairs was expressive of admiration or mere astonishment it might be

difficult to say; but it certainly did not detract from Hugh's complacency. Cynthia herself was in radiant humour; never had she laughed and chattered more delightfully than as they walked through the scented orchards and down the fresh green lanes to Cherryfield village on that summer forenoon, and Hugh acknowledged to himself that she was bad to beat. It is a curious and not unsuggestive spectacle, that of a clownish and partly brainless youth attempting to commend himself to a sprightly girl. Her quick sallies bewilder him; his efforts at repartee are strained and lacking in point; he discerns but dimly the gist of her pleasantries, and his endeavours to laugh or seem amused result in the contortion of his features into an unnatural and rigid smirk, than which nothing looks more utterly ridiculous. Then he tries to lead; hazards remarks the most trivial, the most paltry, with the air of a discoverer; worse, he perpetrates some execrable compliment, and sauces it with a leer, wink, or ogle which the girl affects not to notice; contrives an excruciating jest, and titters complacently at his own wit; mumbles the top of his stick, glares haughtily every now and then through his single eye-glass, and finishes all his sentences with either "awfully" or "don't you know." Just as schoolboys generally pass through two stages, the dirty stage and the dandy stage, neither very agreeable, but the combination of which in the same individual (as sometimes happens) is nothing less than afflicting: so, among young males

of an older growth, we have the boorish variety and the lady-killing variety; which, similarly united in a single human framework, produce a most woeful compound. Poor Hugh was a specimen; still, he did not know it, and the sum of human happiness suffered no diminution on account of it in his person. The only consideration that really troubled him a little was his relations with the two charming girls who now occupied his thoughts; that was a question which would inevitably come up for settlement ere long, and Hugh, who had a keen sense of honour, fully intended to act openly and fairly by them both.

When they arrived at the village, Cynthia, finding they had still half an hour to spare, decided to do some shopping. This consisted simply in popping in and out of sundry small retail establishments with no particular object (as far as Hugh could see), for her purchases did not amount to more than sevenpence halfpenny altogether, and in one or two instances she only made a remark or two, in a vague, cheerful way, and then skipped out again. Old Crook, the shoemaker, received a reprimand for not having sent home a pair of boots as promised; Haywood, the grocer (who issued circulars informing the nobility and gentry of Cherryfield that his annual stock of pork sausages was now ready), was patronized to the extent of twopence for a ball of string; Mrs. Upcraft, the prim little old lady in mittens and spectacles, who kept a fancy repository, was gratified by inquiries as to her late attack of rheumatism;

Mr. Hankins, the clockmaker, had the honour of setting Cynthia's watch; and Miss Brown, at the baker's, who felt the heat and told everybody that the atmosphere of a baker's shop was very innovating, was gladdened by an unusually large order for French bread and Sally Lunns. These transactions completed, Cynthia remarked that it was nearly time, now, to make for the station; and Hugh, whose impatience was increasing every minute, responded promptly to the summons.

"Is the down-train signalled yet, Tom?" asked Cynthia, as she entered the waiting-room, addressing the one porter of the establishment.

"Signalled two minutes ago, miss," replied the porter, touching his cap. "Was you expecting anyone by her?"

"Yes—a lady," said Cynthia. "I shall want her boxes sent up to the Hall as soon as possible, as we're going to walk back. Can you manage that, do you think?"

"They shall be there as soon as you are, miss," said Tom. "The truck's all ready. Hullo—there she is!"

A quick, shrill whistle announced the approach of the train, which was now seen at a short distance winding along a curve and heading slowly for the station. Hugh involuntarily made a step forward.

"No!" exclaimed Cynthia peremptorily. "You are not to come upon the platform. Wait here till I come back."

She turned and left him wondering, and the next moment the train drew up and stopped. Hugh could not see the arrivals, but there evidently were not many of them. Then he walked to the other end of the room, and looked out down the village street. In a couple of minutes he heard footsteps, and two ladies entered, one of whom was Cynthia.

But where was Amelia? Had the heiress not arrived after all? Was there no other passenger? For the only person he could see was a big, stout, elderly woman, with a high colour and a loud voice, a woman who was not a day under fifty-eight, and whose whole appearance was startling in the extreme. Hugh turned to Cynthia:

"What, hasn't she come?" he stammered.

Cynthia at first affected not to hear; the corpulent lady began to gather up her skirts preparatory to walking, and the porter asked her, as porters generally do, whether that was all her luggage. Then Cynthia, controlling with a violent effort a certain suspicious trembling in her voice, replied:

"Why, certainly she has come. Amelia, let me present to you Mr. Hugh Crotchett, who is staying with us at the Hall. Mr. Crotchett—Miss Walker, of whom you have already heard."

CHAPTER VIII.

A BUSY AFTERNOON.

In all our lives there are psychological moments—to use the current phrase—into which are compressed a greater host of emotions, recollections, inferences, revelations and comparisons than the most rapid penman could commit to paper in a day. Hugh was now experiencing one of these. It would be useless to try and enumerate everything that came crowding into his mind as the actual personality of his ideal heiress stood revealed before him; for a second or two, indeed, he was simply stupefied. Then the full force of his disillusionment burst upon him; he realized that the fascinating and sprightly creature he had meant to win was nothing but a chimera of his imagination, that all his dreams were mockeries, and that the panoply of fashion with which he had armed himself for conquest was entirely thrown away. He could scarcely believe it. This portly, elderly person, with her ruddy face and bunchy skirts, the beautiful Amelia! And yet, as we know Cynthia had told him nothing false. She had never

said that Amelia was young; she had actually declined to describe her as pretty; she had simply said that she was the dearest and most delightful of creatures, and a first-rate dancer—and who doesn't know that some of the stoutest women dance admirably, by reason of the muscularity of their feet? But meanwhile he was being introduced, and had to pull himself together somehow. It was impossible to suppress the start, the bewildered stare, the half-uttered exclamation of incredulity; but he managed to make a sort of bow, and to express the pleasure he was so far from feeling in a grunt which might mean anything.

"How de-do, how de-do?" said Miss Walker briskly. "Come, Cynthia, I'm quite ready. The porter will see to the things being sent along, I suppose. Take care of that bandbox, my good man; it's got my Sunday bonnet in it."

The three then started off, Cynthia contriving that Miss Walker should occupy the middle place, as she had reasons of her own for not wishing Hugh to walk beside her. The new-comer was evidently something of an original, and the conversation was almost entirely confined to her and Cynthia, Hugh maintaining an obstinate and sulky silence the whole way. Miss Walker cast a shrewd glance at him every now and then, wondering, apparently, who this queerly-dressed young man could be, and why he looked so glum; for Hugh was no dissembler, and his first bewilderment and disappoint-

ment had given place to rage. He plodded silently on, with frowning brow and compressed lips. Once or twice Miss Walker made a good-natured attempt to include him in the conversation, but met with no response. At last a slight incident occurred which made Hugh more furious than ever. Cynthia directed Miss Walker's attention to the old mill, to which we have before referred, and gave a short account of the legend attached to it. Hugh's eyes followed hers mechanically, and at that moment he struck his foot violently against a large stone that he had not noticed, staggered, plunged, and nearly fell. This mishap, coming on the top of his grievance, was too much for Hugh's self-command. He recovered himself at the expense of an ungainly effort, exclaiming in a pretty loud aside: "Oh, h——!"

"I'll tell you what it is, young man," said Miss Walker, turning upon him with an air of great severity; "if you want to be comfortably provided for in the next world you'd better take care how you refer to it in this, or you may find yourself in circumstances of far more serious personal inconvenience than you've ever experienced before."

Then for the first time Cynthia began to feel compassion for the unlucky youth, and considered that he had now sufficiently expiated his presumption of the morning.

"It's all very well," she said, "but I often wish I had a man to swear for me. Of course, I don't do

it myself, and it would be *such* a relief sometimes! It almost makes one sympathize with the agitation for women's rights."

"Then it's a good thing you're not likely to get them, my dear," replied Miss Walker briskly.

Cynthia laughed, and Hugh, much taken aback at the totally unexpected onslaught of this energetic person, wondered what on earth the girls could have meant by showing such delight at her arrival. If this was their idea of the sweetest and most charming creature in the world, Hugh's, at any rate, was very different. To him she seemed no better than a monstrosity, and it was long before he made up his mind whether he would forgive Cynthia for her share in the transaction. He still preserved an offended air, but as they went along Miss Walker's shrewd and humorous sallies amused him in spite of his ill-humour, and once or twice he caught himself involuntarily indulging in a furtive smile. The fact was that Miss Walker was one of those persons who are either greatly beloved or cordially detested. A rich and independent spinster, she put no bridle on her tongue, and invariably said whatever happened to come uppermost, a habit which not unnaturally procured her many enemies, to whom her various oddities of dress, appearance, and manners afforded a convenient pretext for ridicule. On the other hand, there were those who enjoyed the thrusts which made others wince, and their invulnerability was a sure passport to her favour. She had had

several offers of marriage during her younger days, but—according to her own account—had invariably declined on the ground that she was far too fond of the male sex in the abstract and *en bloc* to attach herself for life to any concrete fraction of it; at which the bewildered suitors had begun to think that perhaps they were better off as they were, after all.

The reception accorded to this singular person on her arrival at the house was naturally enthusiastic, for she was very popular with the Cherryfields. Hugh, not sympathizing with the general joy, went straight upstairs, and here he met his friend, Miss Jorkaway, hurrying along a corridor in great excitement. For a moment he was not sure whether he would tell her what had occurred, or leave her to find it out for herself. The temptation to divulge the truth, however, was irresistible, and when Miss Jorkaway, with eager eyes, said, "Well? well?" in a tone of sharp interrogation, he replied:

"It depends upon what you call well. I don't think she's likely to put anybody's nose out of joint, if that's what you mean."

"O—h!' exclaimed Miss Jorkaway, with an arch look. "Then she's not very good-looking, I suppose. I hope she hasn't been snubbing you. Perhaps you were too ardent, you know. It's a great mistake to be too ardent just at first. Girls don't like it; it makes them ever so shy. Did the fair Amelia——"

"The fair Amelia weighs fifteen stone, and she's sixty if she's a day!" interrupted Hugh brusquely.

Miss Jorkaway stared at him in astonished silence for a moment, and then burst into a loud laugh.

"Oh, that's delightful!" she cried. "I must positively go and see her at once. Mr. Crotchett, I sympathize with you more than I can express;" and then off she scampered to gratify her curiosity, which was now at fever heat.

Hugh marched on to his room in silence, vowing vengeance against womankind at large. As he approached, he heard someone moving about inside. He pushed open the door, which was ajar, and looked in before entering. It was the strange old woman, Virtue Sexton, and unusually strange was her appearance at that moment, when she had no idea that she was being watched. She was hovering about, making believe to dust the furniture and put the room to rights; but the peculiar way in which she touched Hugh's own belongings—his clothes, his toilet articles, the contents of his dressing-case—the low muttering that she kept up, and her utter abstraction from everything beside, struck him as passing curious. For some seconds she continued, entirely unconscious of his presence. Then she turned round and saw him, and she started as violently as if he had been a ghost.

"Don't jump, Mrs. Sexton, it's only me," said Hugh, lounging forward. "Jove, it's hot! Dusting my things, eh? That's all right. You keep my room

in tip-top order, and no mistake. I suppose you've lived here some time?"

"Ay, I have so," replied Virtue. "More 'n eighteen years—just before Miss Cynthia was born. Shall I bring you some hot water, Sir?"

"Oh laws no, thanks," said Hugh, plunging his head and face into a large basin of cold water which stood ready. "Just hand me that rough towel, will you? And, I say, you might give that coat of mine over there a brush down, if you don't mind. That tweed one, I mean, hanging up just behind the door."

Virtue gave him the towel, and then fell to brushing the garment in question.

"You've been out this morning, Sir, haven't you?" she said. "Down the village with Miss Cynthia. It's a pretty place, Cherryfield, don't you think?"

"Oh yes, it's well enough," answered Hugh, in an off-hand way, scrubbing his head with energy. "Rather slow to live here always, though, I fancy. Depends on what one has been accustomed to, you know."

She looked up from her brushing for a brief second and darted a searching glance at him; then she concentrated all her attention upon an obstinate mud-spot on the coat, and rubbed vigorously at it.

"Then you wasn't brought up in the country, I suppose, Sir?" she said in a respectfully inquiring tone.

"I? Oh no; I'm a Londoner; lived in London all my life," replied Hugh, washing his hands.

"Oh, ay," pursued the old woman. "A gay place, London; plenty of amusements, plenty o' society, such as young people likes. I lived in London myself once upon a time—out towards Hampstead way. I dare say you live more in the fashionable part, so to speak?"

"We live in Regent's Park," said Hugh. "That coat ready? Thanks, I'll put it on directly. Where the deuce is my hairbrush? Oh, there. Confound this glass, it never will hang at the right angle. The Cherryfields never go up to town, do they?"

"No, Sir, hardly ever," replied Virtue, folding up the coat that Hugh had just discarded. "And the young ladies don't seem to care about it; they're happy enough down here. Miss Cynthia, now——"

"You're very fond o' Miss Cynthia, aren't you?" asked Hugh, suddenly wheeling round, hairbrush in hand.

"Ay, that I am, Sir," answered Virtue quietly. "And I dare say you are too."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Hugh with a short laugh, "you're a knowing woman, you are. What the deuce put that into your head? It's no concern of yours if I am. But there are few London girls to beat her, I admit."

"I like people who like Cynthia," said Virtue; and the tone in which she said it conveyed to Hugh

the impression that, for some reason or other that he could not even guess at, this queer old woman was his friend. "All the same," she went on, "there's a style about London ladies as country ladies haven't got. They're more stately-like, and dignified. Anyone can see that. Directly I set eyes on your lady-mother, now, I says to myself——"

"Set eyes on who?" interrupted Hugh. "Do you mean Lady Crotchett?"

"To be sure, Sir," answered Virtue. "Directly I set eyes on her——"

"Lady Crotchett's no more my mother than you are," said Hugh roughly.

"Indeed, Sir! I'm sure I humbly beg pardon," said the old woman, who was now nearing the goal of her inquiries. There was an anxious and eager look in her eyes, try as hard to suppress it as she might, which Hugh could scarcely have failed to notice had he looked at her. But he now deliberately turned his back, and, standing with his face to the window, began to pare his nails.

"Well, well, it's a sad thing for a child to lose its mother," resumed Virtue. "Even the best o' friends can't make up for that. 'Specially if the poor thing died before you was old enough to remember her."

"Who told you I had lost my mother?" asked Hugh, with an abruptness that made Virtue jump.

"Indeed, Sir——"

"Look here, old lady, don't you try and come

Miss Jorkaway over me. One pump's quite enough in a house, you know. Ask no questions, and you'll be told no crams."

Virtue coloured, started, and looked abashed.

"I meant to take no liberty, Sir," she said. "I'm not one to meddle in matters as don't concern me. Only as you was pleased to tell me yourself as Lady Crotchett was not your mother, it was but natural——"

"Oh, that's all right," interrupted Hugh. "One doesn't talk about one's family affairs to everybody, that's all. Just put those things away in the wardrobe, will you? Thanks. It's time I went down to lunch."

So saying, Hugh left the room with hasty steps, leaving Virtue in a somewhat troubled state of mind. Of course she had known all along that Hugh was no son of Sir Thomas and Lady Crotchett; her object had been to find out something about his real history and parentage, and she had failed when on the apparent verge of success. But one or two points occurred to her which seemed to show that there really was something to be discovered. Hugh had sharply told her that he would not be questioned. Now she had put no questions at all; she had simply made a remark, and it struck her as curious that Hugh should have sprung so suddenly and so pugnaciously to the defensive. It was clear, then, that there was some sort of mystery about his birth; it was almost equally clear that he himself was particu-

larly sensitive upon the subject, and that she would never hear any more about it from his own lips. A dozen times she told herself that she was an old fool, and had no business to pry into other people's business. And yet she could not help it. The very first occasion on which she had seen Hugh she had undergone one of those strange experiences, akin to what is called the sentiment of pre-existence, that puzzle the wisest of us at times. His face was perfectly familiar to her. She recognised even the unconscious gestures of his limbs, the turns of his voice, the movements of his lips, as though she had known him for years; and there was a subtle *aura* in his mere proximity which seemed to tell her of some inscrutable affinity between them. Such being the case, it was not wonderful that her interest and curiosity were aroused, and that she hoped to discover, in the story of his antecedents, a clue to the enigma.

Meanwhile, Miss Walker was enlivening the party at lunch. Hugh, on entering, took a vacant seat next to Nora, whose eye he carefully avoided; Cynthia sat on the opposite side of the table, and Miss Jorkaway at the further end. There was a considerable amount of laughter going on, apparently at some dry remark of Miss Walker's, the drift of which he did not catch; even the Squire was in suppressed convulsions, and Mrs. Cherryfield was beaming with good-humour and amusement. The only person who did not look quite happy was Sir

Thomas Crotchett. Evidently the new arrival was too much for him. Twice already had Miss Walker cut him short at the beginning of one of his most impressive observations; once already she had actually laughed in the most irreverent manner at a compliment which for elaboration, complexity, and erudite abstruseness was among his very finest efforts. Sir Thomas was not accustomed to this sort of treatment, and felt rather indignant; while his wife sat with a subdued expression on her honest face, half fascinated by an audacity which could venture to assert itself in the presence of so great a man.

"Well," remarked Miss Walker, dropping into a more serious vein, "every sphere has its advantages as well as its drawbacks, and country life is no exception after all. Here you have exquisite green peas, and no next-door neighbours—a combination, my dear, that you can scarcely prize too highly. It isn't everyone who is so favoured, as I know too well myself."

"The peas are certainly delicious," said Lady Crotchett fervently.

"But what is your objection to next-door neighbours?" asked Mrs. Cherryfield with a smile.

"I hope you may never have cause to share it," replied Miss Walker. "I'm an old maid, and I've been a martyr to next-door neighbours all my life. Bath, Cheltenham, Leamington, Harrogate, Scarborough, and all the rest of my haunts are simply

populated by next-door neighbours, and no one else to speak of. That's why the places are so unendurable. Why, a next-door neighbour isn't a neighbour at all. You've Bible authority for that. Who was the neighbour of the Jew that fell among thieves? A man who lived in Samaria, nearly thirty miles away! That's my idea of what a neighbour ought to be, and that's why I envy you good people who live a country life."

"Have some more peas, Amelia," said Cynthia, laughing.

"And don't be so unsociable," added Nora.

"Unsociable, indeed!" ejaculated Miss Walker in a high key. "And so I've spent forty years in attempting to benefit my fellow-creatures only to be called unsociable. Well, such is the way of the world. I'll have another glass of Rüdesheimer after that. But when you've seen as much of next-door-neighbour society as I have, with all its pettifogging gossip and tittle-tattle, I'll be bound you'll agree with me. What people call a 'cheerful neighbourhood' is simply a cluster of cliques, all bent on finding out what their next-door neighbours have for dinner, and wondering how the people next-door-but-one contrive to pay their way. I know all about it, young folks, and so will you if you ever live to be old maids."

"Clique isn't quite the nicest way of putting it perhaps," remarked Nora. "Call them *côteries;* it sounds better—and what more natural than that

people with similar tastes should form little circles of their own?"

"*Côteries*, eh?" cried Miss Walker, scornfully. "Petticoateries, you mean—for they're mostly composed of our own irresistible sex, you understand. Oh, I know what they're like, and I've no very high opinion of them, I can tell you."

"Ahem," began Sir Thomas. "It is not unfrequent——"

"Come, that's too bad!" exclaimed Mrs. Cherryfield. Sir Thomas drew himself up, and frowned slightly. "You mustn't defame your own sex here, Amelia, or we shall all be up in arms against you. Miss Jorkaway, you know the world better than we do. What do *you* think of all these dreadful charges?"

"The etymology is not inapt, though," put in the Squire, smiling.

"I've always found my next-door neighbours most interesting," replied Miss Jorkaway. "It was quite a pleasure to watch them, and——"

"That's just it," said Miss Walker. "I've a strong objection to being watched and taken an interest in. And it's always the women who do it."

"Ahem," began Sir Thomas again. "It is not unfrequent——"

"But it's only the interesting persons whom one cares to watch," rejoined Miss Jorkaway, with a very feminine smile for the benefit of her antagonist.

Sir Thomas now began to feel rather angry, and determined that he would be heard.

"Ahem!" he said loudly. "It is not unfrequent——"

"You may give me some of that jelly, my dear, if you don't mind," said Miss Walker, bending her head towards Cynthia.

Sir Thomas made an awful pause.

"Not unfrequent"—he resumed with a stern look —"for cynical members of the male sex to deride the weaknesses of women; it is not so often that we find women acknowledging the justice of such criticisms when applied to their sex as a whole. The candour shown under these circumstances is in itself highly to be commended; while the strictures of a woman upon women have, in addition, an originality, a pungency, a familiarity with the very foibles and idiosyncrasies she condemns, which invest them with a value in every sense of the word unique. Now, I dare say you are aware, Miss Walker, that La Bruyère has some very caustic utterances upon this subject; and it would be most interesting if you would favour us with your comments upon them. 'Women,' he says, as you doubtless remember, 'ever in extremes, are always either better or worse than men.' That is a statement which—er—may or may not be true. Again, he lays it down that 'it is men who are the cause that women do not love each other.' That, too, is an assertion inviting much interesting and profitable discussion. And we must

not forget the dictum of Juvenal—ah, I see you already remember the one I mean — *Nulla fere causa est, in quâ non fœmina litem moverit.* I need scarcely refer to Ovid, or to that well-known passage in one of the Buddhist sutras — let me see, how does the Sanscrit run? However, I have it upstairs; and without going further into details, I may safely say that no literature in any country with which I am acquainted, whether in the East or West, in ancient, mediæval, or modern times, is devoid of passages which, directly or indirectly, bear out your criticisms to the letter."

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed Miss Walker in humorous consternation. "Your memory is positively crushing. Do you know as much as that about everything else?"

Sir Thomas, now beaming and complacent, cleared his throat for a modest disclaimer, when Hugh, who seldom joined in conversations of this sort, unexpectedly leaned across the table, and said:

"Yes, that he does, and more too. You'd better not tackle Sir Thomas. He's a regular Cyclops, I can tell you."

"A regular *what?*" asked Miss Walker, opening her eyes.

"Cyclops—don't you know who Cyclops was?" replied Sir Thomas's champion. "That old Greek philosopher who invented cyclopædias, you know. They were named after him in consequence. He was a sort of walking dictionary, and I always

say that Sir Thomas is a second edition of that same."

"Oh, indeed. I think I'll make a note of that," replied Miss Walker gravely.

Sir Thomas felt really grateful to her, and Lady Crotchett looked benevolently across at Hugh. No one seconded the Baronet's wish for a disquisition on Juvenal and La Bruyère, and in a few minutes Mrs. Cherryfield gave the signal for a move.

It was an exciting afternoon for Miss Jorkaway. She determined to keep an eye upon Miss Walker, in whom she already recognised a natural foe; and then the other guests were expected to arrive about six o'clock, when no doubt the social scuffle would begin in earnest. She had not forgotten the mysterious prognostications of old Virtue, which added a pungency to the anticipated campaign; she saw that Hugh, in his lumbering way, was already beginning to dangle after Cynthia, and was quite prepared to believe that when all the characters were marshalled upon the stage, the true hero or villain of the piece would declare himself in due form. The one thing she did not suspect was that the play had already begun, and that old Virtue, with all her crazy notions, might prove a more efficient detective than she herself.

The dinner-party in the evening was a great function. The advent of four new guests—one a lady of high rank—enlarged the company very materially, and Miss Jorkaway felt as though she were assisting

at some glorified *table d'hôte*. There was now only one more visitor to come, and he might turn up at almost any moment. But it often happens that a certain constraint is visible the first time a party is brought together; the people are imperfectly acquainted with each other at best, and the impressions formed are sometimes extremely vague, sometimes entirely erroneous. It thus happened that there was just a shade of stiffness over the banquet; even Miss Walker was reserved, and the conversation, though it never flagged, was just a little lacking in character. For this reason, we will defer making acquaintance with the new arrivals until they have had the refreshment of a good night's rest, and are assembled at the breakfast-table in the morning.

CHAPTER IX.

SUNDAY, AND HOW THEY SPENT IT.

THE freshness of morning—and Sunday morning—was reflected in the faces of Mrs. Cherryfield's guests as they took their places round the well-spread board upon the following day. The methodical habits of the household were apparent in the punctuality with which the early meal was always served. It was not the custom at Cherryfield Hall for people to come straggling downstairs whenever they thought fit from half-past eight till eleven, complacently assured of hot coffee and crisp toast at any hour of the forenoon. On the present occasion the chiming of the half-hour was the signal for assembly, and at five minutes past there was no empty seat.

Sir Thomas Crotchett, the orthodox respectability of a British baronet tempering the abstract superiority of a man versed in the origin of creeds, vindicated the prerogatives of his order with the aid of a white waistcoat, a gleaming satin stock, and a chin shaved to the closest quick of Sabbath smoothness. Lady Crotchett hallowed the day in purple

silk, and carried a little gilt-edged Prayer-book in her hand lest she should mislay it before church-time. Opposite to Lady Crotchett was Lady Marian Alabaster, in the very plainest dress that ever cost a cheque for guineas. Her distinction consisted in the entire absence of anything remarkable; a quiet lady with a mild, good, sensible face which had once, no doubt, been beautiful, calm and unobtrusive in her manners, challenging criticism with the fearlessness monopolized by those who are entirely unself-conscious. Blanche was colourless, and thought a deficiency of red corpuscles the proper mark of blood, like a high nose or the Austrian lip. A neatly-cut profile divided two cream-pale cheeks, and an indifferent mouth fulfilled the purpose for which it had been provided by keeping severely closed. Miss Alabaster never conversed; it was enough for her to exist and be contemplated. That was one reason why she never looked at anybody. Her eyes, in this respect, were wonderful; they, certainly, were not closed, and yet they looked at nothing. The necessary "Yes" or "No" or "Thank you" was occasionally heard, it is true; but the sound seemed to come from the impalpable and viewless air, and to have no connection with the listless mouth or the unseeing eyes above it. The external world was nothing to this cold creature save as it helped to form her own subjective consciousness. She was in it to be humbly and distantly admired; there was no more need for her to recognise the existence of her

votaries than for an idol to reward devotion by a wink. And idols never wink; the day of miracles is past.

Dr. Tabernacle's short figure, bushy red-brown hair, and rough-hewn features were well preserved for a gentleman of fifty-six whose meals and rest at nights had been systematically interrupted for some thirty years. He was not a fashionable physician, but a working general practitioner whose guineas cost him tissue. To his credit it may be remarked that he had never invented a new disease, and invariably called old ones by their old names. Valetudinarians feared him; he believed in rump-steaks for breakfast.

"Oh, la, doctor, I've got dilatation of the heart, I know I have."

"Stick to it, then, ma'am, stick to it," grunted the doctor, risking a small income.

But the lady solaced herself by calling him a bear, and sent for him in a hurry the week after, when the baby was blackening with croup. This sort of thing brought him a yearly revenue of some two thousand pounds, and he lived very contentedly upon eight hundred, being a wifeless man.

The stately folds of black brocaded silk, gracefully harmonizing with a mantilla-like lace veil of the same conventual hue, which reposed on the doctor's right, enshrined the presence of Mrs. Honoria St. Paul. There was a lenient melancholy in this lady's gentle eyes, an expression which sorrowed for the

world's mistakes, yet was not angry with them. Her hair was dark, and mingled itself beautifully with the veil; she only wanted a gilt cross upon her breast to complete the picture of an abbess of the drawing-room, a *dévote* with the grace of vocation as substitute for unattainable holy orders. There was a religiousness in her smile at once austere and soothing; there was a reserve about her lips which foiled obtrusiveness. Her nose drooped with thought; she might have sat for a figure of the modern Church—forsaken if not persecuted, a pillar of salt mutely waiting to purify and preserve the world. Cynthia looked at her with something of awe in her young eyes; Lady Crotchett cast approving glances at the modest elegance of her attire; even Miss Walker felt the hallowing influence, for she was a pious woman in her way. But meantime the general appetite was sharpset, and the business of the breakfast-table would scarcely have been much impeded had the accusing angel himself been there in person.

"I suppose we are all for church this morning?" said Mrs. Cherryfield, with an inviting smile. "The Rector will be delighted to have such an addition to his congregation. Perhaps some of us would like to go to Armedreding instead—it's a beautiful walk across the fields, and a dear little old-fashioned church that is quite worth seeing of itself."

"I should like the walk of all things," said the energetic Amelia. "I dote on old-fashioned country

churches. I want to find a place where they have a bassoon and a fiddle up in the gallery in the regular old style, with a clerk to say Amen. One wearies of your surpliced choir-boys."

"And we, I think, will attend the parish church," remarked Sir Thomas. "I have a great idea of supporting local institutions. The influence of the clergy is one of the most potent factors in social evolution. It prevents the pace from becoming too rapid, and imparts ballast to the body politic."

"Yes, yes; we couldn't do without the clergy," assented the Squire. "A thoroughly well-meaning set of men. Our Rector, here, for instance; though he's prejudiced, you know—prejudiced, as I often tell him. In fact, they all are, in one way or another."

"Their influence is always on the side of good, at any rate. At least, of what they believe to be good," said Lady Marian.

"An important difference," replied the Squire. "What the world wants is a more discriminating sense of what 'good' really is. It is just there that half the mischief lies."

"That remark is one of the most comprehensive I ever remember to have heard," observed Sir Thomas, beginning to break an egg. "It contains the whole question in a nutshell. Is there an absolute good, or is good merely relative? Now, Aristotle——"

"What the world wants is a few grains more common-sense, it seems to me," cut in Miss Walker. "We should get on very well if the half of us weren't such fools. What do *you* say, Dr. Tabernacle?"

"What the world wants it probably won't get—a radical improvement in its sanitary conditions," answered the doctor. "Better drainage in the agricultural districts, better ventilation, and more room to move about in. More sleep, and more out-of-door exercise. A little more soap and water wouldn't do any harm either. First make men healthy, and then you may make 'em wise."

"Oh, but, doctor, that only applies to the very poor," said Mrs. Cherryfield. "You must prescribe for all of us—all sorts and conditions of men."

"That's just what I'm doing," said Dr. Tabernacle. "Half the diseases I have to combat result from the detestable artificialities of modern life, and the unwholesome conditions that people create for themselves. Some of the folks who come to me have nothing the matter with them in the ordinary sense; they only *think* they're ill. Well, that very belief that they're ill when they're not is a disease in itself; it's *that* that's wrong, and it springs from a morbid condition of the nerves, induced by bad air, crowded rooms, late hours, insufficient sleep, unnecessary excitement, improper food, and all the rest of it. A man's no business to feel that he's got a heart or a liver or a stomach or anything else. Directly he

does, you may be sure he's been doing something wrong."

"Perhaps so," said Mrs. St. Paul in a rich, soft voice. "But health is only one thing among many. What the world wants is a True Religion."

"What, another?" exclaimed Miss Walker irreverently. "Why, there are enough true religions in the world to stock the entire Solar System, it seems to me."

Mrs. St. Paul smiled indulgently.

"But they can't all be true," she said. "You are speaking of superstitions."

"And who's to judge between them? What's the point of difference?" asked Miss Walker, stirring her coffee as she spoke.

"There is no essential difference," replied Honoria mildly. "A religion (using the word popularly) is simply a superstition that is in vogue; a superstition is a religion that has passed out of vogue. That is the whole affair."

A look of astonishment went round the table. What could this saintly woman mean?

Sir Thomas came to the rescue.

"But surely," he said, "that scarcely exhausts the question. I have made some study of comparative religions, and am bound to say that underlying all of them there is one great principle, which, concealed as it may be by subsequent developments, a mass of error no doubt in many cases, is yet *there;* and it is that principle which makes the system a

religion, in the proper sense of the word. Do I make myself clear so far?"

"Perfectly," answered Mrs. St. Paul, in her musical voice. "And so far I am with you. But what is the principle? So much depends on that."

"Belief in a supernatural Power," said Sir Thomas promptly.

"Pardon me." Mrs. St. Paul contradicted him at once. "It is there that you are mistaken. You don't go deep enough. The principle which is the key to the origin of all religions is Loose Thinking."

Sir Thomas coloured with surprise, and began to clear his throat. He was not accustomed to be called a loose thinker—to his face, at any rate. Lady Marian interposed.

"I think that religion consists in serving God and doing all the good we can to others."

Mrs. Cherryfield and Lady Crotchett nodded.

"It always seems to me that there is something so irreligious in the idea of a God," murmured Mrs. St. Paul. "Don't you agree with me, Dr. Tabernacle?"

"Can't say I do, ma'am," barked the doctor, making havoc among the devilled kidneys.

"Heavens above us! Then are we to have nobody to worship?" exclaimed Miss Walker, very indignantly.

"But worship is so immoral, you know," pleaded Mrs. St. Paul in a persuasive tone.

This was too awful for words. A dull thud of

silence fell upon the party. Poor Mrs. Cherryfield tried to make a diversion in favour of broiled ham, Yarmouth bloaters, and clotted cream; but the spell was too strong for such devices. At last Sir Thomas awoke to the sense of his responsibilities, and rose manfully to the occasion.

"No one, I am sure, will be readier than Mrs. St. Paul herself to acknowledge that her last words were somewhat—er—staggering," he said with judicial reserve. "They involve, in fact, a subversion of the universal instinct that it is difficult, at first, to grasp. A religion without an object of worship seems a contradiction in terms; it cuts at the root of everything which is associated in human experience with religious obligations; it deprives morals of their highest sanction, and reduces us, I may say, to something little better than intellectual automata. Still, I would not condemn any system, however revolutionary, unheard. Mrs. St. Paul says that what the world most needs is a True Religion. Will she be kind enough to tell us more about it?"

Mrs. St. Paul laughed gently, and threw back a corner of her veil.

"It is very simple," she said; "indeed, it is the very simplicity of it that is the chief obstacle to its acceptance. The love of mystery is strong in half-educated minds; and people *are* half-educated, aren't they? They read, and talk, and feel, and even learn; they do everything but think. And the result is inevitable. They must have a creed, and the more

incomprehensible the creed the more firmly they believe it. Now the True Religion has no creed. It begins and ends with Acquiescence."

"'Acquiescence in what?" put in the spokesman.

"In THAT WHICH IS," replied Mrs. St. Paul solemnly. "And ah, the joy of it! We do not know, we cannot know, and we *do not wish* to know, how the Universe came to be; we are only sure that it was not created; but it exists, and we are part of it, each one of us, as much a part of it as a galaxy of suns and worlds. This leads to the knowledge of our own essential insignificance. We appear to-day like bubbles on a stream; to-morrow the bubbles have burst and been forgotten; and that is the history of the entire human race. The transitoriness of humanity being thus established, it follows that the individual must be even more contemptibly insignificant, and that the hope of personal immortality is nothing but a maniac's dream, born of the petty selfishness, ignorance, and misplaced pride of the ephemera called Man. What, then, do human lives matter? Crush out a million of them, and how is the Universe affected? The only important thing is that the Universe shall endure, and go on and on in fulfilment of its grand, unconscious destiny. Arriving at a knowledge of this precious truth, we are filled with that spirit of 'rejoicing, alway rejoicing,' described by my excellent and gifted namesake in one of his charming Epistles. We acquiesce in our comparative nothingness during life, and look forward with even

more than acquiescence to our annihilation afterwards; we rejoice to renounce the individuality which, after all, is simply *selfishness made flesh*, and to contemplate ourselves as infinitesimal fractions of the great Whole; we know that there is nothing answering to what the multitude call God, because a very little training in metaphysics shows us that the conception of an Infinite Consciousness lands us in unthinkabilities, and is at variance with the laws of thought; and we regard the Universe as the sum and substance of that which is and cannot but be, by virtue of its own intrinsicality. It is to us the expression of the Inherently Necessary; meaningless, purposeless, passionless, yet unfathomably profound; a mere circumference, if you like, of which each one of us is the centre—yet that circumference the All-encircling Nought."

"That's a lively sort of religion," remarked Miss Walker, breaking the silence that followed. "There's a modesty about it, too, which is quite edifying. Another cup of coffee, please, Williams, and not quite so much sugar in it this time."

"It all sounds to me rather shocking," observed Lady Marian gravely.

"It's perfectly dreadful!" exclaimed Lady Crotchett, with an appealing glance at her oracle.

"Ahem," began Sir Thomas. "Your statement, Mrs. St. Paul, has the merit of perfect clearness, and is by no means unimpressive. I confess, however, that I am not convinced. What! no meaning, no

purpose, no reasonableness in the Universe? Impossible, my dear lady—quite impossible."

"How can you judge of the Universe when you are yourself a fraction of it?" answered Mrs. St. Paul. "A part cannot put itself outside the whole it helps to constitute. What you mean by reasonableness is simply a relation between what you call the Universe and your own mind, and you can never prove that that apparent reasonableness does not depend entirely upon the latter term of the relation. In fact, you are hemmed in by your own subjectivity, and struggle as you may you will never get outside of it."

Sir Thomas shook his head and frowned. The sophistries of this woman were actually beginning to embarrass him.

"Now, then, Dr. Tabernacle, it's your turn," said Miss Walker. "Come, give us all a dose of common-sense; we're terribly in need of it, I fear."

"Not a bit of it my turn," retorted the doctor grumpily. "I only undertake to cure people's bodies; their minds are looked after by a different branch of the profession altogether."

"Thank you," said Honoria, with a martyr's smile. "My admirable namesake was accused of being mad too. We are fellow-sufferers, you see."

"Well, I hope all this won't interfere with our plans for the morning, at any rate," said Mrs. Cherryfield, with an attempt at sprightliness. "Will you walk to church, Lady Marian, or would you prefer the carriage? It is just about a mile."

"Oh, I'll walk certainly," replied Lady Marian, "and so will Blanche. The service is at eleven, I suppose?"

"At eleven," said Mrs. Cherryfield. "Miss Jorkaway, you might join the party to Armedreding, I think. It'll be a change for you. We lunch at half-past one."

"You'll be left all alone, I'm afraid," remarked Miss Jorkaway in an undertone to Mrs. St. Paul, next to whom she sat.

"Oh, I never mind being alone," replied that lady cheerfully. "I have my favourite authors, and they're company enough for me. I shall spend a delightful morning, thanks."

"And which are your favourite authors?" inquired the governess with curiosity.

"Well, there's Clifford, for one; I'm reading his 'Common-sense of the Exact Sciences.' Do you know it? a most satisfying book. Thomas à Kempis is another, and *Lyra Agnostica*, by a number of different writers. The prophet Isaiah, too, is a great pet of mine; he must have been a charming man, I often think. Boccaccio, Sir Thomas Browne, and John Bunyan have each a place in my library; I delight in all of them. There is no doubt that popular Christianity has done great things for English literature. Oh, and 'The Christian Year,' I had forgotten that; and of course all Renan's works."

"Your tastes are pretty wide," remarked Miss Jorkaway, feeling rather befogged.

"Yes; we of the True Religion are very catholic in our sympathies," acknowledged Mrs. St. Paul. "We admire and we stand aloof."

"Well," observed Miss Walker, in her blunt style, "I can't say I see much difference myself between you cultured folk who believe that consciousness and intelligence have been produced from some unconscious mechanical force, and the poor savages who attribute power for good or evil to a senseless block of wood. It seems to me that it's six of one and half a dozen of the other. You may despise us poor benighted Christians to your heart's content, but you can't despise people who worship stocks and stones, for you're all in the same boat together."

Mrs. Cherryfield here rose rather hurriedly in order to cut short the discussion, and the other ladies, nothing loath, followed her out of the room. The eyes of the Squire twinkled, as though he would have liked to put in a word; but happily the move became general, and people began to disperse. The poor hostess was grievously annoyed at the turn conversation had taken, and felt herself bound to say something in the way of self-exculpation as soon as an opportunity occurred. To the simple country lady, who was not an omnivorous reader and scarcely ever went to town, the type represented by Mrs. St. Paul was a strange and monstrous phenomenon of whose existence she had been only dimly aware; her husband's vagaries she could tolerate, perhaps because she had been accustomed

to them all her life; but Mrs. St. Paul's talk had something so daringly impious about it to her innocent ears as to verge upon the disreputable. And with such an orthodox surname, too! That made it all the worse.

"I assure you, dear Lady Marian, you cannot possibly have been more horrified than I was," she said, as they walked down the avenue to church that morning. "I've known Mrs. St. Paul for years, and——"

"But who is she?" interrupted Lady Crotchett uneasily. "She doesn't look that sort of person at all; there's quite a High Church air about her, not at all what one would expect, you know. She absolutely shocked Sir Thomas."

"Well, it's true I hadn't seen her for a long time before I asked her down," acknowledged Mrs. Cherryfield, "and I did hear from a cousin of mine that she had taken up with some new-fangled ideas. But of course I hadn't a notion of anything like this. She used to be one of the most pious, religious women I ever knew; a great deal more pious than I was, I remember. I think it was about three years ago that she changed. Her husband died last August."

"Oh, then she is a widow!" exclaimed Lady Marian. "Possibly it was the husband's influence that—a——"

"What was the husband? An infidel lecturer?" asked Lady Crotchett, who seemed quite stirred up for so mild a woman.

"My dear Lady Crotchett! He was a City missionary," replied Mrs. Cherryfield. "A most devoted, earnest creature. He died of typhoid fever caught in some rookery in the East End."

"A City missionary!" cried both the other ladies in astonishment.

"He was indeed," resumed Mrs. Cherryfield; "I remember him well. What their life can have been like after she turned atheist one can only conjecture. But she really is an excellent woman in her way. I've known her do numbers of kind acts; she was very, very kind to me, once; and she is certainly sympathetic. You may be sure, however, that I shall not let her see much of Nora and Cynthia. One cannot be too careful of girls at that impressionable age. She must confine herself to Sir Thomas and Dr. Tabernacle," said the good lady with a smile.

"Ah, Sir Thomas will soon turn her inside out," remarked Sir Thomas's faithful spouse. "I've never known such a man, my dear, for unmasking error. I always feel safe with him. He ought to have been President of the Royal Society years ago; but as I always tell him, his inveterate modesty prevents him from claiming his due. Just look at that wonderful discovery of his about the fossil giants of the Neolithic Age. Why, there they were, huge fossilized human beings—excavated I don't quite remember where, but in excellent preservation, you know, and affording a most remarkable proof of the truth of the Bible

where it says that there were giants in those days; and what do you think? He was universally pooh-poohed, and the fossils were said to be nothing but great stone images, or statues, or idols, or something equally absurd! One can't, positively, be surprised at the spread of atheism when a man like Sir Thomas is a victim to such prejudice and petty jealousy."

Mrs. Cherryfield murmured a sympathetic assent; and just then Sir Thomas himself overtook them, accompanied by Blanche and Nora. It was a clear, bright, beautiful morning, with small fleecy white clouds floating lazily across the blue, and the chime of the Sunday bells pealing melodiously through the air; a morning pervaded by that subtle Sabbath calm which is experienced in its fulness nowhere, perhaps, but in the English country; one of those rare, sweet days that are as days of heaven upon earth. The church was a venerable building that had undergone internal renovation—in which it might have been taken as a type of what the ecclesiastical organization it belonged to ought to be; for there are some who tell us that if the Church of England be not subjected to that transforming process—the process which is to leave her venerable externally while replacing her three-decker and family-pew theology by the more spacious accommodations of the Higher Criticism—she will become a fossil, like Sir Thomas Crotchett's giants. Outside, the Rev. Courtenay Giles's church was old, and gray, and picturesque;

inside there was the contrast of a florid reredos, a highly ornamented stone pulpit, a handsome screen, and a choir of surpliced choristers. The service was fully choral, and the Rector preached a very severe little sermon about the delinquencies of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin. One could not help thinking what a pity it was that the misguided monarch himself was unavoidably prevented from hearing Mr. Giles's opinion of his conduct; no one then in church, you see, could reasonably be held responsible for the golden calves and other abominations associated with his memory, and yet everyone felt that Mr. Giles was scolding *him* about them—a most unfair proceeding. Meanwhile Miss Walker, Miss Jorkaway, Hugh, Cynthia, and some fifty or sixty of the adjacent farm-labouring population were being warned against the deceitfulness of riches and the snares of fashionable life by the Rev. Mr. Posset, in Armedreding Church; an edifice which still preserved the same fine old wooden pulpit (of a rich treacle hue), the same lazy old square pews, and ancient hatchments, which had been erected there in the reign of King Charles II., with 1662 in curly figures upon the reading-desk. There was a barrel-organ in the gallery, which played six tunes—long, short, and common metre—and four chants, with only very occasional protests in the shape of an untimely squeak; unless, indeed, some unpractised hand was in temporary power, when a moment's inadvertence would bring the melody to a premature conclusion in a long-drawn and lugubrious wail,

like the ghost of a departed organ in distress. Miss Walker enjoyed it all immensely, and did not in the least mind being told how small her chances were of ever getting to heaven as long as she continued in her present comfortable circumstances. The farm-labourers, of course, considered themselves safe enough, their twelve or fifteen shillings a week not constituting a sufficiently serious impediment to future bliss even on Mr. Posset's own showing; so that nobody was very much disturbed. It would have required a far more awakening discourse than either Mr. Posset's or Mr. Giles's to have overclouded the serenity of that bright Sabbath day, and awakening discourses were unusual with both divines.

The Squire and Dr. Tabernacle spent their morning in a pleasant discussion on vivisection, bacteriology, and the last new failure in antidotes; strolling in soft hats round about the shrubberies. In the afternoon the two old fellows changed their coats and went to the four o'clock service at the parish church, where they listened with much gravity to a sermon from the curate demolishing the entire Darwinian system. Professor Huxley was soon nowhere, and Mr. Spencer was not left a leg to stand upon. But the Squire didn't mind; he enjoyed the singing and the lessons and the prayers, and was even heard attempting to add his voice to the others when they began the hymn "Come unto Me, ye weary, and I will give you rest." Dr. Tabernacle, a man of strong religious convictions, was more irritated by the youth's vapourings, and

thought with what heartfelt satisfaction he could have cupped him, had circumstances been favourable to the operation. But he, too, felt the soothing influences of the service, in spite of Mrs. St. Paul's denunciation of worship as "so immoral"; a recollection of which crossed his mind with a humorous suggestion of incongruity as he joined in the prayers and hymns. And so they spent their Sunday, all these differently constituted people at Cherryfield Hall, and there was probably not one of them who would have wished to abolish the day of rest had it been possible to do so. The severe Honoria herself, who regarded the whole thing as a relic of some effete mythology, was all the better for it, though scarcely conscious of the fact; while not even the sermons they had had to submit to spoilt the enjoyment of the churchgoers. They dined as usual at seven o'clock, and Lady Marian sang them "O rest in the Lord" afterwards with a sweetness and a pathos which Mrs. St. Paul confessed brought the tears into her eyes.

"It goes sorely against my conscience all the same," said the enlightened lady in a burst of self-reproach; "but the best of us have our weak moments, and after all a pleasurable agitation of the nervous system has the double advantage of assisting the digestive processes and helping one to realize one's share in those cosmic pulsations which thrill the entire Universe, and bind all humanity together."

CHAPTER X.

MISS JORKAWAY'S SECOND ADVENTURE.

HUGH CROTCHETT—blunt, lumbering, and in love—was not altogether a person to let concealment like a worm i' the bud feed on his damask cheek. He made no overt declaration, it is true; but the persistent way in which he dogged Cynthia's footsteps, and stared at her, and talked to her about odds and handicaps and other mysteries of the turf, made it pretty evident to most people what his condition was. And most people were simply amused. Hugh, in spite of his hirsute chin, was no more than nineteen years of age; Cynthia a year and a half younger. He was the last person in the world likely to touch her heart, save with a sense of good-humoured compassion for his folly, and therefore no one saw fit to interfere; had it been otherwise, Mrs. Cherryfield would have been on the alert at once. To Miss Jorkaway, however, the palpable infatuation of the poor youth was an important and most delightful incident, and she forthwith set to work to watch the movements of the two. Nothing they said or did escaped her

vigilance; the most casual interchange of glances was full of hidden meaning, which taxed her ingenuity to construe; she spied and she pried, smiling comfortably to herself at what she regarded as their artless manœuvrings; she even attempted to stir the plot into greater activity by endeavouring to make play in the direction of Blanche Alabaster, just to see if Cynthia could be aroused to jealousy. As Blanche, however, had never given the slightest sign of consciousness that either the governess or Mr. Crotchett so much as existed, she might as well have intrigued with one of the cast-iron angels which decorated the new meeting-house in High Street. The Squire, of course, saw nothing; he never did see anything. But Sir Thomas was not so unobservant, and there were occasional symptoms that the excellent Baronet felt a little uneasy upon the subject.

There was another person, too, on whom the evident *penchant* of Hugh for Cynthia was by no means lost. This was Virtue Sexton. The strange attraction which Hugh Crotchett so unconsciously exercised over the grim, visionary old woman increased as the days went by. Here Miss Jorkaway found herself for once at fault. She could not even guess in what the fascination consisted; the whole thing was so absurd, so unnatural, so uncanny. No two persons in this world, she argued—and argued correctly—could have less in common than the loutish, turf-frequenting hobbledehoy and the gaunt,

melancholy, superstitious old Calvinist, with her prophetic dreams and awful creed. And yet Virtue haunted his room at every hour of the day, on one pretext or another; now folding up his clothes, now cleaning his pipes, anon arranging the articles upon his toilet-table, and sometimes losing herself in a sort of trance—from which she would start suddenly, with a scared look, like a woman with some secret on her soul. She, too, watched Hugh's sheepish courtship as opportunity allowed, and the sight of it made her glad. To bring about a marriage between these two seemed to her an object to live and die for. She could not have explained the wish—no, not even to herself. All she knew was that Cynthia was the very apple of her eye, and that there was some mysterious affinity between herself and Hugh which caused her whole soul to go forth in the passionate desire that his suit might prove successful.

A picnic to some ruins, twenty miles off, on the following Tuesday chimed in with the general inclination. Sir Thomas welcomed the opportunity it would afford for reflections upon certain archæological theories he had long cherished as his own, and Lady Crotchett was only too glad to second him. Nora and Cynthia rejoiced in the prospect of a scamper, Miss Walker had for two whole days been without any safety-valve for her superfluous energies, Dr. Tabernacle could never have quite enough of the open air, Mrs. St. Paul adored the picturesque in nature as well as in prose, Lady

Marian was pleased with everything that pleased her neighbours, and Hugh hailed the proffered facility for ingratiating himself still more with Cynthia. Blanche didn't count. She went, however, with the rest, and Miss Jorkaway stayed at home to nurse a headache. Poor Miss Jorkaway! It was a grievous disappointment to her. She had looked forward to that picnic as to a campaign, and expected any amount of unforeseen results from it; but she awoke in the morning with a splitting pain in her head, and was compelled to stay ingloriously between the sheets. Even the chatter of Kezia Pottleberry, who brought her up a cup of strong tea at nine o'clock—just when the party were setting off—was inadequate to console her; she was doomed to loneliness on the very day when so delightful an opportunity had offered for indulgence in her favourite pursuit, and could only bemoan her fate. The tea, however, did her good. She even fancied, after drinking it, that she could relish a bit of toast, and when Kezia so far exceeded her instructions as to supplement the toast with a rasher of hot broiled bacon, she found that she was able to give a very fair account of both. By half-past ten, indeed, she felt considerably better; she had, in fact, an excellent constitution, and her headaches, though severe enough at the time, never lasted long; so the upshot of it was that she began to think she might after all as well get up, and see if a breath or two of fresh air would not complete her cure.

Behold, then, our baffled schemer and pensive invalid, armed with a large sunshade and enveloped in a cotton morning-wrapper, languidly wending her way through the shrubberies; the sun pouring its beams from a cloudless sky, and a gentle breeze making soft whispers amid the foliage. It was a lovely day, and the governess strolled quietly along towards an outlying nook of the Squire's domains which she had never hitherto explored. This was a retired spot, well covered with shrubs and trees, and through it there ran a deep brook, connected with the adjacent trout-stream, which cut off the further extremity of the recess from the main garden. It so happened that the Squire was particularly sensitive about this part of his acreage. Nothing annoyed him so much as when it was invaded by outsiders; and the occurrence was not uncommon, seeing that the ground in question lay on the further side of the runlet, and had nothing about it to warn the boating stranger that he was on private property. Miss Jorkaway, we need scarcely say, had no intention of fording the little stream; her aim was simply to find a seat upon the mossy bank which rose on its hither side, and abandon herself to that spontaneous form of mental processes called thinking about nothing.

As she approached, however, a strange, sweet sound suddenly arrested her attention. She stopped and listened, fancying she must have been mistaken; but no—she heard it again, stronger and even sweeter than before. The air seemed vibrating with a fine

thread of exquisite melody, which pierced and entranced her ear. There was a dreamful beauty in it, a pure, unconscious pathos, that would have appealed to a coarser nature even than the listener's; with an undercurrent, too, of voluptuous rapture, suggesting that sensuous and deep-seated oneness with the living world in all its loveliness which distinguished the Greek ideal. It seemed as though it were the very sunlight singing; on and on it went, now rising into passionate aspiration, now sinking into cadences at once resigned and trustful; anon it flooded the entire heavens, borne along upon the wings of the breeze like a volume of unearthly sphere-music; then gradually died away, in a silence which still throbbed with it.

This was mysterious, this was exciting; and Miss Jorkaway, less impressed with the beauty of the melody than with the enigma of its origin, stepped smartly off to find out all about it. A few paces brought her to the brink of the rivulet which ran across the lower end of the park, and there, upon the other side, she saw——

It is really a difficult and even delicate matter to say what she saw. How shall we put it? What guarded periphrasis shall we use? Perhaps we had better tell our story plainly. She saw *the underside of a pair of legs*, encased in yellow flannels; a small, well-shaped hand reposing in full relief upon the grass, with a violin beside it; the foreshortened figure of a recumbent somebody, the owner of the

legs and hand; and a punt drawn up close by. Miss Jorkaway was struck speechless with astonishment and delight. Fate had been kind to her after all. She was not to be left desolate; she was to have an adventure, and perhaps an even more thrilling one than if she had joined the picnic. The violinist was no common person, evidently; he was in every sense of the word a mysterious stranger, and all traces of her indisposition vanished like a cloud.

She waited, expecting him to move; but five minutes passed, and he gave no sign of life. Then his fingers—she could not see his face—closed slowly over the handle of his violin, and raised it. He was going to play again.

This, however, Miss Jorkaway could not stand. If he would not speak, she would; her curiosity was too strong for her to want more music then. Summoning up all her courage, of which, to be sure, she had enough and to spare, she advanced to the edge of the stream, and, raising her voice, called out:

"I beg your pardon, but are you aware that these grounds are private?"

The sudden start of surprise on which Miss Jorkaway had counted did not come off. The violin was arrested in its movement, and then slowly sought the ground again; but there was no reply. Then the stranger turned his head slightly in the direction of the voice, just enough to enable him to see the

speaker, disclosing, as he did so, the most perfectly beautiful face Miss Jorkaway had ever seen. Curved lips were fringed by a small, crisp moustache of gold-colour; the complexion was fair, with a healthy bronzen tan; the curly locks were a shade darker than the moustache, the nose was firm and straight, the eyes a brilliant violet. The question of age was doubtful. He was certainly not a boy; he had rather the appearance of a youth matured and perfected—a youth of twenty-one endowed with the settled ripeness of full manhood, or a full-grown man who had preserved the grace and vigour of his adolescence. A remarkable person altogether, thought Miss Jorkaway; but why did he never speak?

The stranger gazed at her for some moments with the very laziest air, and a look less of curiosity than of abstract contemplation; the sort of look one has when, preoccupied with other matters, one is forced against the will to examine bits of spar and such-like geological frippery in a museum. Miss Jorkaway did not seem to interest him in the very least; he only turned his eyes to see where the noise came from. At last he said, taking up his violin again:

"Yes, I had noticed it. Very private and retired indeed. That's why I like it so."

Sweep went the bow once more over the magic strings, and Miss Jorkaway was forgotten. But she was not a person to be set aside so easily. Indig-

nation at this cavalier behaviour gave her a fresh impetus, and inspired her to make another effort.

"I mean that the grounds belong to Squire Cherryfield, Sir; and he is very much annoyed when they are trespassed on by persons he doesn't know."

The stranger played serenely on, and took no heed of her whatever. It was only when he came to the end of the passage—in a "Légende" by Wieniawski—that he seemed conscious of her continued presence. Calmly laying the violin by his side, he shifted his position, and, leaning on one elbow, said, with a thought more animation than before:

"Squire Cherryfield? Well, he's an enviable man. He can come here and play the violin all day if he likes without being interrupted. Does he deserve his good fortune, do you think?"

"Sir!" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway, quite nonplussed.

The violinist began to pluck up bunches of grass with an abstracted air.

"Do you—er—live at Mr. Cherryfield's, may I ask?"

"I do," replied the governess promptly. "My name is Jorkaway—Miss Jorkaway. You are a stranger in the neighbourhood, I suppose?"

He looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Talkaway?" he asked tentatively.

"Jorkaway, Sir!" screamed the lady in a rage.

"Her name is Jorkaway," repeated the stranger

musingly under his breath. Then aloud: "A relation of the family, if I may be permitted to surmise?"

"Er—not precisely," said Miss Jorkaway more calmly. "That is, I have relations *with* the family, in the sense that—that——"

"Not a relation, but has relations with them," remarked the stranger in the same pensive tone. "Of course the distinction is obvious, and most aptly put. In any case, you represent the family at present. And the family, through you, orders me away."

"I presume, Sir, that after what I have told you, you will scarcely continue to trespass on the Squire's ground?" said Miss Jorkaway with a touch of defiance.

"Never presume," replied the violinist gravely. "It's so much safer not to. Always wait and see what turns up, as I do."

Then he rolled over on to his chest, and, folding his arms upon the grass, hid his face in them very comfortably and appeared to go to sleep. Miss Jorkaway, however, was not to be beaten. Sitting down upon the bank, she mounted guard over the intruder, determined to get satisfaction out of him one way or another; and there she sat for over half an hour, chafing at the delay, yet grimly enjoying the contest nevertheless. At last, just as her patience was beginning to give way, he moved. This time, she was sure, he was going to take himself off, and

then she would contrive somehow, though how she scarcely knew, to find out all about him. But no; he only raised his head, and, resting his chin in both hands, looked meditatively across at her in a way that was extremely disconcerting.

"What an indomitable person you seem to be, Mrs. Jorkaway," he said after a pause. "Isn't it almost past your time for lunch?"

"It's nothing to you if it is, Sir," replied Miss Jorkaway briskly. "I have already told you twice that you're on private ground, and I now ask you for the last time whether you intend to stay there or to go away?"

"I intend to stay," said the stranger, without turning a hair. "And so apparently do you. I've no objection, unless you talk too much. Will you have an apple?—Catch!"

So saying he extracted two beautiful apples from a bag that lay by his side, and deftly tipped the larger of the two full into Miss Jorkaway's lap, beginning to eat the other himself with great apparent relish.

"How dare you throw apples at me, Sir?" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway, half beside herself with indignation. "I don't believe you're in your right mind, and I shall complain of your conduct to Squire Cherryfield as soon as ever he returns."

"Much better eat your apple and be thankful," said the imperturbable stranger, munching his own nonchalantly. "Unless fruit disagrees with you. It does with some people, I believe."

"I've a great mind to send for the police," was the lady's sharp retort.

And yet she felt remorseful, too; he was such a handsome man—why did he behave so queerly? She looked at him almost wistfully as he lay there, supporting himself on his elbows and champing away at his apple. Then she looked at hers—a splendid specimen from Jersey — and began to hesitate.

"There was a man once upon a time," observed the stranger after a long pause, "who got into a sad mess by giving a woman an apple. It's true that there were two other claimants for it, besides a wife somewhere in the background. There was also a woman, rather earlier in the world's history, who got herself and everybody else into trouble by giving an apple to a man. Well, perhaps you're right. It was an unlucky thing to do. Suppose you throw it back!"

Then Miss Jorkaway had to struggle against a smile which somehow would not be repressed. She was really beginning to feel hungry; and the apple looked wonderfully tempting.

"No, I shall keep it," she said at last.

The stranger interested her more than ever, and she now felt a strong desire to make her peace with him. If he wouldn't go, he wouldn't, and there was an end to it; and who could tell whether he might not be some important person, destined to play a part in the schemes that her imagination revelled

in? In any case, she had fulfilled her duty to Squire Cherryfield; that was one source, at least, of self-complacency.

The stranger, without taking any notice of her last words, here threw away the remains of his apple, and, rolling over on his back, began puffing a cigarette. The sun, streaming brightly over his recumbent form, and lighting up his hair, made him a picture to gaze at; but his taciturnity was enraging, and Miss Jorkaway began once more to lose all patience with him.

"May I ask whether you live far from here?" she said at length, insinuatingly.

"I don't live anywhere," he answered without moving. "That is, I don't live anywhere in particular. Why?"

"Really—I had no special reason," replied the lady, abashed. "I only asked."

"I follow the sun," continued the stranger, from a halo of blue smoke.

"How delightful that must be, now!" was Miss Jorkaway's artful comment. "You have been a great traveller, no doubt?"

"Greatness is always relative. I've seen most of the world, I think."

"And any number of interesting people, I'll be bound," pursued Miss Jorkaway, now feeling quite friendly towards him.

"Any number of people, certainly. Some of them interested me—just a few, who didn't know it."

"You don't care for your fellow-creatures, then, as a rule? Rather despise them, perhaps, than otherwise?"

"No—I don't object to them, so long as they are not intrusive," he replied, tilting his straw hat a little further over his eyes. "It's not their fault that they exist."

"You seem to have a very high opinion of yourself, Sir," remarked Miss Jorkaway, archly.

"Just at present I have; almost the very highest," said the other gravely. "What I may think to-morrow of course it's impossible to say."

"No doubt you're self-satisfied at the manner in which you have been behaving," said the lady with an air of raillery.

The stranger turned his eyes upon her lazily. "Mrs. Jorkaway," he said with a touch of earnestness, "have you never studied any metaphysics?"

Miss Jorkaway only stared.

"Listen to me," continued the stranger, turning over on his side. "I said just now that I had a very high opinion of myself. This you evidently misunderstand. The self that I approve so highly is nothing more than the synthesis of all the sensations of which I am subjectively conscious. It consists, at this moment, of a sky of the purest blue, a flood of golden sunshine, a bank of moss, a rippling brook dappled with flecks of sapphire, a murmuring among the trees, the perfume of a cigarette, and a general sense of happiness. I know nothing about

the objective reality of these things: I am simply conscious of impressions, impressions which are for the time being a part of myself, which go, in fact, to constitute my present individuality or self. And of that self, so composed, I have the highest possible opinion."

"I don't know what you mean," said Miss Jorkaway bluntly. "How can the sky and the water and the other things be part of *you*?"

"She's a dualist!" exclaimed the stranger in a tone of scornful disappointment. "I might have known it. Of all things in this world, a dualist!"

"A duellist? What do you mean, Sir?" cried Miss Jorkaway, who again began to think he must be mad. "Who ever heard of such a thing? And what has that got to do with the question, I should like to know?"

"There, there, never mind," he said indifferently, rising to his feet. "That myth of Eve and the apple is evidently a metaphorical description of the birth of dualism, and it has been an apple of discord ever since. Anyhow, it's time you went in to lunch. I'm going now, so there's no need for you to stay here any longer."

The next moment he had placed his violin in its case and was standing up, pole in hand, in the punt. He raised his hat to Miss Jorkaway with a sudden, brilliant, mocking smile, and before she could recover from her surprise was propelling himself swiftly and scientifically down the stream. The

plash of the water was the only sound that now broke the silence; his voice had ceased, his face was turned away, his strong, graceful figure was disappearing fast from view. Miss Jorkaway could not suppress a little gasp of disappointment. Her anger at his pertinacity had, after all, been half simulated; even the real irritation she had felt was more at his cool indifference and imperturbability than at any intrusiveness he might have shown. And now he had actually vanished, and that without having left the smallest clue behind him as to his identity or whereabouts! It was too tantalizing, too provoking altogether.

But the apple was still there. Miss Jorkaway looked at its blooming cheeks with something like affection, as it lay, plump and rosy, in her lap. Then she took a handsome bite, and found it positively delicious. The dear man! And she so ungrateful, so inhospitable, so rude! Miss Jorkaway, munching busily, forthwith began to bestir herself. She had had her adventure, and now got up and bent her steps in the direction of the Hall. It was getting on for one o'clock, and the apple only served as an appetiser; besides, she wanted to make enquiries of the servants, to discover if possible whether they had heard of any stranger staying in the neighbourhood who might answer to the description of the violinist. A man so eccentric, so handsome, and so accomplished could scarcely arrive in a small village without attracting attention;

somebody must know of his existence, surely—unless, indeed, the whole thing had been no more than a vision of her brain.

She went in, and made, for an invalid, a tolerably respectable lunch on cold roast beef, mixed pickles, and a cranberry pie; intending to send for Kezia Pottleberry as soon as the meal was finished. Kezia always knew everything; she was a perfect news-agency in herself, and could be relied on to find out all about everything she might not have heard of already, when once she was put upon the scent. But it so happened that on this particular occasion Kezia's talents were not to be employed. A tap came at the dining-room door, and Virtue Sexton entered, a piece of sewing in her hand.

"If you please, miss, can you tell me whether the mistress wants these pillow-cases finished to-day, or would to-morrow morning be soon enough?"

"The pillow-cases?" repeated Miss Jorkaway, folding up her napkin. "She wants them as soon as they can be got ready, I believe. Better finish as many as you can this afternoon, and do the rest to-morrow."

"Thank you, miss," said Virtue, retiring.

"Oh—Virtue!" called Miss Jorkaway after her. "Just come back a minute. I want to ask you something. Have you heard of anybody in particular staying in the village during the last day or two?"

"Not I, miss," replied Virtue. "I'm not in the

way of hearing gossip, and I don't pay no attention to it when I do."

"Because——" Miss Jorkaway paused and blushed. "Because I had a very singular adventure this morning. I went down as far as the brook, you know, at the further end of the park, thinking the fresh air and quiet might do my head good, and, to my astonishment, there was a gentleman on the other side playing the violin. He was a very handsome man, with fair hair. At first I couldn't see his face—it was hidden from me somehow; but at last he moved, and when I told him he was trespassing he actually refused to go away, behaving, I must confess, in a most extraordinary manner. He was in a punt, you know, and wore flannels and a straw hat. I think he was quite a gentleman, in spite of the way he conducted himself, but once or twice I caught myself wondering whether he was in his right senses, he did talk so strangely. Where he went to afterwards I haven't the least idea. He didn't seem to pay any attention to what I said, and once, instead of answering me, rolled over on the grass and went to sleep for half an hour under my very eyes. Now he must be staying in the neighbourhood, and it occurred to me that some of the servants might have heard him spoken of by —by—the tradespeople, you know. Are you sure you've heard nothing of the kind during the last few days?"

During this recital Virtue's face had been growing

very stern and set, an expression of something akin to horror coming into her eyes. She bit her lips nervously, and her hand clutched the piece of work she held with an almost convulsive grasp. At last she said, speaking with apparent difficulty:

"A fair-haired man, you say?"

"His hair was a ruddy gold-colour," replied Miss Jorkaway.

"And you couldn't see his face? He kept his face hidden from you?" pursued the old woman eagerly.

"Not all the time, of course," said the governess; "but for the first five minutes I saw nothing but his legs and the glint of his hair. It was the way he was lying. But what of that?"

To her astonishment Virtue sank breathless into the nearest chair, the work dropping on the floor. "The man o' my dream!" she uttered in a hollow tone. "He's comin' on us at last!"

"What in the name of fortune do you mean by that?" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway, rising excitedly to her feet.

"Have you forgotten?" replied the old woman, turning her stony gaze upon the bewildered governess. "I was warned the man was comin', and now here he is. *You've* seen him. We shall all see him before long. He's an evil man and a dangerous—dangerous, I say. I was in the lonely forest lookin' for Cynthia and never findin' her, and this man had her in hidin' and I could never see his face. And

now he's come. O Lord, O Lord, preserve us all from mischief!"

Miss Jorkaway went up and shook her roughly. "If you go on raving in this nonsensical manner you'll get yourself landed in a lunatic asylum," she said with intentional brusqueness. "I wonder, Virtue Sexton, that a woman of your years and experience can like to make such an exhibition of herself. I've no patience with you. What do you suppose Miss Cynthia would say if she heard you talking like this? She'd be most indignant, and quite right too. Dreams, indeed! Yes, I remember the dream you said you had about *me*, and a pretty impertinent one it was. Give over all such nonsense for goodness' sake, and talk like a reasonable creature."

Virtue sighed, and picked up her pillow-case. "Ay, ay," she muttered, shaking her head. "They don't understand—nobody understands. How should they? Maybe it ain't their fault. But when the trouble comes, miss, remember as I warned you of it."

Then Miss Jorkaway's contemptuous indignation began to give way to her love of mystery. "There's something in all this that I don't know about," she said in a suspicious tone. "I don't want to pry into your secrets, Virtue Sexton—I hate busybodies, and always have—but it's plain enough to me there's something behind all this. You don't like talking about your past life, for one thing. Then——"

"Stop there!" interrupted Virtue with a threatening scowl. "It's no use your trying to pump me, miss. You've tried it once or twice before, you know, and you made nothing of it."

"Well, well," said Miss Jorkaway, going on another tack. "But you can tell me one thing, at any rate. Who *is* this mysterious man you're so afraid of? Where does he come from, and what do you know about him?"

"I *know* nothing about him—as yet," replied the old woman rather sullenly. "I may have my own suspicions, or I may not. He may be a man as I've been lookin' out for these eighteen year or more—I can't say. But I tell you he's an evil man, and he'll work woe for more 'n one of us. There! I say no more. I've said too much already. You may peer and pry about as much as ever you please, miss, but you'll never find out more 'n I let you know. Well, I feel a bit better now, and it's time I went back to my work."

She glided from the room without another word, leaving Miss Jorkaway puzzled, angry, and almost mad with curiosity. She cared little for the old woman's disrespectful way of speaking to her—that did not matter in the least; the pleasure of a new mystery was looming in the immediate future, and it now behoved her to keep a bright look-out for the reappearance of this golden-headed fiend, which would probably take place soon. To do her justice, she had no faith whatever in Virtue's superstitious

prognostications; still, they had a fascination for her that it was not easy to resist, and added zest to the interest she felt in watching the development of events.

The afternoon was devoted to certain household duties, and shortly after five o'clock she went upstairs to lie down until it was time to dress for dinner. In a few minutes she fell into a refreshing sleep, from which she was only awakened by the sound of a cheerful bustle downstairs which announced the return of the picnic-party. Miss Jorkaway still lay there without moving, in a pleasantly restful state of mind and body. She had no reason to suppose that she was wanted, and her headache of the morning gave her a sufficient excuse for keeping quiet. Toward seven she arose and dressed.

The drawing-room was quite full when she entered, and Mrs. Cherryfield, always kind and considerate towards those about her, lost no time in enquiring after her indisposition. This, she was able to say, had been entirely dispelled by a little fresh air, a day of quiet, and a most refreshing nap. The picnickers looked sunburnt and animated; everybody was talking all at once, recalling the adventures of the outing, which had been an immense success, as Miss Jorkaway was modestly charmed to hear. Just then, she happened to glance towards a group standing near the fireplace, now filled with an artistic arrangement of ferns and hot-house flowers. There, to her surprise, bewilderment, delight, and what not, she

recognised—the hero of her adventure; no longer, of course, in flannels and straw hat, but accurately arrayed in evening dress; with the same nonchalance, the same enchanting smile, the same easy and unconscious grace that had so fascinated her in the morning. And as the thought struck her—"Virtue's villain in the flesh!"—she heard Mrs. Cherryfield say:

"Lady Marian, our friend has come at last. Allow me to present to you Mr. Carr Veryan, from abroad."

CHAPTER XI

LOVE AMONG THE RUINS.

THE arrival of Mr. Veryan at Cherryfield Hall marked a distinct epoch in the visit of the house-party. Without in any way thrusting himself forward, or assuming a prominent position in their midst, he nevertheless became the centre, so to speak, of everything; the room seemed empty if he was ever absent, and others were scarcely missed when he returned. That he was an unusually brilliant man was obvious; but the secret of his influence lay in a certain magnetic attractiveness, which every person felt but none quite understood. He pleased without making the slightest noticeable attempt to please; in fact his chief characteristic lay in an almost entire absence of self-consciousness, which rendered it impossible to charge him with either personal vanity or posing. His keen enjoyment of life and everything it gave him was infectious, with the result that his presence acted like a ray of sunshine on all who came in contact

with him, and thereby increased the pleasure of the Squire's guests to a most satisfactory extent.

The effect on Virtue Sexton of her first glimpse of the new-comer was extremely curious. She gazed at him as a student of prophecy might gaze at some prominent military or political personage whom he had Scriptural reasons for believing to be Antichrist or the apocalyptic Beast. To her he was the foreordained instrument of doom, a man of evil purposes, of almost superhuman wickedness, arrayed as an angel of light. Miss Jorkaway, who was the only person in the house acquainted with the old woman's craze, endeavoured to laugh or scold her out of it; but she might as well have expostulated with the winds. Virtue followed him with her eyes as continuously as her status in the family permitted; she watched Cynthia, too, with the most anxious care; and on one occasion, when Veryan happened to greet her with a passing nod and smile, she repaid him with a scowl of the most uncompromising hostility and distrust. On her alone, of all the people in that house, the charm he exercised fell dead.

The unconventionality of Veryan's character was never more strikingly exemplified than during a conversation which occurred the evening of his arrival, just before the ladies left the dining-room. He had flashed a gay glance of recognition at Miss Jorkaway on meeting her eye across the table, and a remark or two followed which led to the disclosure of their

having encountered each other earlier in the day. Mrs. Cherryfield, somewhat amused at the incident, then turned to Veryan and said,—

"But you know we were expecting you several days ago. You arrived from abroad last month, didn't you?"

"Yes," replied Veryan. "I was in London for a day or two, and then went down to Camelot Towers, in Monmouthshire, to see old Lord Llwydiarth of Tintagel. I stayed there nearly a fortnight."

"Really! That strange old recluse about whom one hears so many curious stories?" exclaimed Mrs. Cherryfield with interest.

"The most exclusive man in the four kingdoms," put in Miss Walker. "The two or three old Jacobites who still exist are upstarts beside Lord Llwydiarth. Pray tell us all about him, Mr. Veryan. It's not often one gets a chance of authentic information concerning a lineal descendant of King Arthur."

"He traces his descent from Modred, Arthur's nephew," replied Veryan with a smile. "That is a point he always insists upon. Yes, he's a wonderful old man, and lives almost entirely in the past. His principal enjoyment is in the unique collection he has made of all the old chronicles, poems, and traditions connected with the Arthurian age, and he is just now deeply engaged in writing a commentary upon the Mabinogion. He knows the ballads of Llywarch Hen well-nigh by heart—an achievement

no one would dream of objecting to if he hadn't contracted the habit of reciting them aloud, which, considering that they are all in Cymreig, is apt to embarrass his audience. Of course such a man is exclusive, but a more courtly and delightful old gentleman to his few intimates it would be impossible to conceive."

"Has he any family?" enquired Sir Thomas Crotchett.

"A son and a daughter—Geraint and Guinevere Pendragon," said Veryan. "The son married a daughter of the Duke of Merioneth about ten years ago; Guinevere is still single, and likely to remain so. She must be five-and-thirty by this time. Lady Llwydiarth has long been dead."

"And did you come here direct from Camelot Towers?" asked Mrs. Cherryfield.

"No," said Veryan. "Lord Llwydiarth wanted me to stay some days longer, but I had promised to go and see a friend of mine in Heathercombe named Trotter, so I had to cut short my visit."

"Trotter?" repeated Mrs. Cherryfield in polite surprise.

"Yes—he keeps a grocer's shop in High Street," said Veryan, sipping a glass of Burgundy. "I dare say you never heard of him."

"A grocer's shop!" exclaimed two or three voices, while a look of astonishment went round the table. "Do you mean to say you've been staying with a grocer?" The question came from Lady Crotchett.

"I do," replied Veryan, apparently rather surprised in his turn. "What then?"

"I had no idea that people ever visited grocers," remarked Mrs. Cherryfield hesitatingly. "Wasn't it a great change after Camelot?"

"A most striking contrast," said Veryan. "That constituted half the charm of it. No two people in the world, I suppose, could be more utterly unlike each other than Abel Trotter and Lord Llwydiarth. But each is interesting in his way. Llwydiarth I have already described to you. Trotter is an old-fashioned, plodding, hardshell Dissenter, a shrewd, uneducated man with all the characteristics of his class. You see, I enjoy studying life in all its phases; and considering that Trotter is one of the most hospitable men I know, that he can supply me with any number of ideas that I never heard before, and that his wife gave us Irish stews for supper that I am not likely to forget, I cannot see anything strange in the fact that I thoroughly enjoyed my visit."

A pause followed, during which Veryan began eating grapes. Then Lady Marian said, quite simply,

"And you have no class feeling? You do not consider it beneath your station to be the guest of a small tradesman in a country town?"

"I can only say," replied Veryan with equal simplicity, "that I felt as much at home at Mr. Trotter's as I do here."

"Oh, I like that!" cried Cynthia impulsively. "I think it's splendid. I believe there's something worth studying in everybody—something to be learnt, something to be admired. But it isn't everybody who would be able to go in for it, of course."

"I doubt if you, for instance, would care to stay a week with Mr. and Mrs. Haywood, Cynthia," remarked Nora, laughing. "What do you think about it, Blanche?"

Miss Alabaster's eyelids quivered for a moment, and it really looked as though she were about to speak. Before she could make up her mind, however, Miss Walker said, in her blunt fashion—

"It's exactly the sort of thing that I approve of other people doing. For my part, I'm not selfish, and haven't the slightest wish to share the credit of the achievement."

"It's very beautiful—in theory," put in Lady Marian.

"Lord Llwydiarth and Mr. Trotter can neither of them be persons of very enlightened views," said Mrs. St. Paul; "it is simply a choice between two different forms of ignorance—one sordid, the other picturesque."

"Ahem!" began Sir Thomas. "The point at issue"—— But here his hostess gave the signal for moving, and the excellent baronet's remarks were prematurely cut short. The conversation after the ladies disappeared took a different turn, and brought Dr. Tabernacle to the fore. It was but seldom,

apparently, that the grumpy old physician wasted his eloquence upon the other sex. Veryan and he now kept the ball rolling between them, and it was considerably later than usual when they joined the ladies in the drawing-room.

The fact that Veryan had been a distinguished guest in such a place as Camelot Towers was sufficient in itself to absolve him from anything worse than eccentricity in visiting a grocer afterwards, and the incident had therefore no evil effects upon the estimation in which he was already held. On the contrary, it rather heightened the interest the ladies felt in him. A man so superbly independent of social opinion was evidently no ordinary person, and the charm of his perfectly natural manners and complete absence of self-consciousness made itself apparent from the very first. Even Hugh took to him. Accustomed as young Crotchett was to feel his inferiority when in the presence of educated and well-bred men, he appreciated the unaffected friendliness of a stranger who had not the least atom of "side" or "frills"—to use his own expression—and who treated him as if he had been his equal. Some were occasionally a little disconcerted at Veryan's deficiency in what they considered tact—he always expressed his views with such curiously blunt simplicity; but although he sometimes startled everyone he never offended anyone—except, indeed, Miss Jorkaway at their memorable first interview, and she, as we have seen, forgave him almost as soon as

the affront had been committed. In a word, he was the most popular member of the circle.

All this was a great though unspoken relief to Mrs. Cherryfield. It must be confessed that the open-hearted lady had suffered one or two misgivings as to her prudence in inviting to her house a guest of whose antecedents she knew nothing. It was true that she had met him at Netherton Abbey, the seat of Sir Robert Southwell, which was in itself, so far, a guarantee of respectability; but it was also true that the Southwells had only met him at a German spa, and were as ignorant of his family and past life as she was herself. Veryan never referred to either; and no one knew whether his reserve was due to a constitutional peculiarity or to the fact that he had reasons of his own for concealment. Hitherto, however, everything had turned out well. He was evidently a man of independent means, and his arrival had infused an additional life and gaiety into the party which made him exceptionally welcome.

A few days afterwards, Cynthia, Nora, Veryan, Miss Walker, Dr. Tabernacle, and Mrs. St. Paul started for an afternoon ramble to the ruins of an old Danish encampment that lay some three miles off. Walking was not one of Mrs. St. Paul's favourite practices, but a certain tender interest that she had begun to take in the old doctor's spiritual welfare led her on this occasion to make the effort. It was pitiable, she thought, to see so masculine an intellect enslaved by an exploded superstition, and when she

reflected upon the influence which she, an enlightened and beautiful woman, might exercise over this misguided man she deemed that her duty was clear. It was also clear to her that Dr. Tabernacle was rather coy in his advances to the angelic sex, and this she put down to a sort of surface timidity, which a little encouragement on her own part would quickly and easily dispel. Imagine some dignified and graceful swan, paying stately courtship to a rough, wiry-haired, ill-behaved old sheep-dog that never noticed her presence except to bark at her, and now attempting the conversion of the sheep-dog to more cultivated tastes and suaver manners; an admirable picture, truly! Who would not sympathize with the swan, and watch the campaign with interest? The doctor had a will of his own, though, and at first upset Mrs. St. Paul's plans by devoting himself to that very empty-headed chattering young person Cynthia, while Nora walked with Veryan. By this grouping she found herself, to her no small discomfiture, paired off with the terrible Miss Walker, and was constrained to listen to Dr. Tabernacle, just behind, entertaining Cynthia with a dissertation upon the merits of cork soles. Gradually, however, as they struck across some fields, this undesirable arrangement was in part disorganized, and the conversation became more general. But it was some time, unfortunately, before it improved in tone.

"We're not far off now," said Nora at last. "When we get over the crest of that rise we shall have a

splendid view. We call it Sunset Hill, because we once saw the very finest sunset from it that I ever remember."

"Sunsets and ruins go well together," remarked Miss Walker, sententiously.

"True," assented Mrs. St. Paul. "And yet, you know, the sun always rises again, while ruins never do."

"I adore ruins," said Cynthia, "especially if they are very old. They make me feel so delightfully young by comparison. And then they're such jolly places for picnics."

"Designed for the purpose, no doubt," said Veryan.

"I adore ruins too," observed Mrs. St. Paul. "I'm an ardent advocate for the preservation of ancient monuments. It is exhilarating to contemplate the memorials of the past, and to think of them as the graves of those bygone errors through which we have attained our present standpoint. I would not have a stone of them displaced."

"But you wouldn't like them rebuilt, I suppose," said Miss Walker. "There's a good deal of restoration in the air, you know, just now."

"Shocking!" exclaimed Honoria. "No; I would have them simply kept. Do you remember," she added in a lower and more confidential tone, turning to Dr. Tabernacle, "what our dear Karl Pearson says about the ruins of Christianity? He would not have them destroyed, but tenderly hedged in, as it

were, and preserved from further decay. All the dogma that was so noxious has disappeared; the poetry alone remains, and that is too precious a heritage to be dispersed. A beautiful conception, isn't it?"

"I don't know the gentleman, but it's uncommonly kind of him," replied the doctor. "I'm a bit of a ruin myself; perhaps you'd like to hedge me in too, and take care I don't crumble away altogether?"

"My dear Dr. Tabernacle!" exclaimed Mrs. St. Paul with a blush.

"Is ivy good for preserving ruins, or isn't it? I never can remember," said Miss Walker. "But I'm always reminded of Conway Castle and such places when I see an old man with a very young wife clinging about him. It's the ivy that takes to the ruin, and the ruin can do nothing but submit, which makes the resemblance all the greater. Whether it tends to preservation in the human subject is of course another question."

This remark was considered by Mrs. St. Paul a perfect outrage on good taste, though the worthy spinster certainly had no *arrière pensée* in making it. Just then a burst of laughter from the two girls at some dry speech of Veryan's interrupted the conversation, and in a few minutes the encampment itself came in sight. The spectacle was not particularly imposing. It consisted in a series of deep trenches and high rounded earthworks, all covered with soft, short grass; there were no monoliths, no bastions,

no architectural remains whatever. From the historical standpoint the spot was undoubtedly interesting, but no one could possibly have deemed it picturesque. The view from the highest point, however, was extremely fine.

"I wish I had lived in those old fighting days," said Cynthia, as they stood contemplating the mounds. "It must have been so splendidly exciting and jolly."

"More exciting than comfortable, I expect," remarked Miss Walker, depositing herself upon a convenient ledge of grass. "It's taken some centuries to get any comfort at all out of these remarkably primitive old fortifications of yours, and they're rather hard to sit on even now."

"Still, they're not vulgar; and that is something to be thankful for in this terribly vulgar age," said Mrs. St. Paul. "They look like tombs; tombs of a past barbarism, and of dead barbaric men. It is, to my mind, a most painful truth that increased enlightenment brings with it a certain garishness, a tendency to vulgarization in fact, which one does not associate with our ancestors however rude they may have been. But one has to pay a price for everything."

"Well, now, I actually agree with you for once," replied Miss Walker. "The world is really getting abominably vulgar, and it's the Americans who have done it. I believe that Heaven itself must have become most dreadfully Americanized within the last

hundred years or so—ever since the Declaration of Independence. Just think what an inrush of Yankees there must have been, you know: why, they must have spoilt everything, and we shall find the dear old biblical Heaven more like New York than New Jerusalem. Of course it doesn't matter to you, because you don't believe in such things, but it's a very mortifying consideration for us, I can assure you."

"Come, cheer up, Miss Walker," said Veryan, laughing. "Americans are mostly dissenters, you know, so of course they'll all be in the back seats."

"I don't believe in Americans being in the back seats; they're a pushing lot," replied Miss Walker, doubtfully. "But we shall have to make the best of it, I suppose. You needn't look so shocked, Nora my dear—I don't mean any harm, you know. I never do, whatever I may happen to say."

"Was I looking shocked?" said Nora, smiling. "I didn't know it. I don't believe, now I come to think, that I have ever met an American in my life."

"You're not an American, are you, Mr. Veryan?" asked Miss Walker, turning upon him abruptly.

"I have not that privilege," he answered.

"Well, then, I haven't committed myself," said Miss Walker with a relieved look. "You see, some Americans are so perfectly *comme il faut* that I consider them no better than impostors. People have no right to go about the world under false colours,

in my opinion. But dear me, where on earth are Dr. Tabernacle and Mrs. St. Paul?"

"There they are, over near that clump of trees," said Cynthia. "And how she is talking, to be sure!"

It was true. The resolute lady had actually succeeded in carrying off her victim while the others were frivolling, and was now making the best of her opportunity. Cynthia moved a little way round the encampment, and Veryan followed.

"Amelia's a queer creature, but I'm very fond of her," she said with a slight laugh. "She never minds what she blurts out, and if you really had been an American she would have found a way out of it somehow. I wish I had half her quickness."

"Shall I pray for your amelioration?" asked Veryan.

"Mr. Veryan, you have fallen immeasurably in my estimation!" exclaimed Cynthia very indignantly. "I couldn't have believed you capable of making such a speech."

"What's the matter? What's he been doing now?" cried Miss Walker, overhearing them.

"You will never know," replied Cynthia. "There are some crimes over which one draws a veil."

"That's right," remarked Veryan approvingly. "Never expose the weakness of a friend. Come and walk with me a little over there."

This time it was she who followed him.

* * * * *

Half an hour afterwards they started on their return journey—all, apparently, in good spirits. Mrs. St. Paul looked complacent, as a person looks who has fulfilled a duty or made a good beginning, and Dr. Tabernacle seemed as cheerful as a man generally is when he has had a *mauvais quart d'heure* and got well through with it. He now talked almost amiably to Miss Walker, while Nora fell beside Mrs. St. Paul, and Veryan and Cynthia strolled along together in rather unusual silence. If Miss Jorkaway had been present she would have noted the circumstance and built a vast superstructure of theory upon it which would probably have been all wrong. But, as it was, nobody noticed anything, and nothing of any moment occurred until they were within half a mile of the house. Then someone, happening to glance up, called attention to the fact that Hugh Crotchett was coming towards them through the fields. He was slouching heavily along reading a newspaper, with a short black pipe in his mouth; and his brow contracted as he looked up and saw Veryan and Cynthia together.

"Well, Mr. Crotchett, what's the news?" cried Miss Walker as they came within speaking distance. "Why didn't you come for a walk with us?"

"Any change in the odds?" put in Veryan, good-humouredly.

"Not as I know of," answered Hugh gruffly. "But there's something here to interest you," he added, putting the paper into Veryan's hand. "A

big burglary at that old Lord What's-his-name's, where you were staying some time ago."

"A burglary at Lord Llwydiarth's!" exclaimed Veryan, much astonished. "Impossible! Where's the paragraph?"

Hugh pointed it out to him, and Veryan, stopping in his walk, read it eagerly.

"What a shocking thing! That poor old gentleman," said Cynthia. "I hope he didn't lose any of his treasures?"

"Apparently not," said Veryan, studying the account. "Not any of his relics, that is. No—only plate, jewelry, and a large sum of ready money. Of course burglars don't go for old books and manuscripts. But the loss must be pretty heavy, it seems to me."

"I'm dreadfully sorry to hear it," said Mrs. St. Paul in polite distress. "Enough to give an old man like that a most serious shock. Do they give many particulars?"

"Oh, yes," replied Veryan. "Why, I remember some of these things quite well. I remember that old silver drinking-horn, and the tea-urn—a massive piece of plate, that. And a collection of uncut emeralds and rubies—Lord Llwydiarth showed them to me only three days before I came away! I know where they were kept. The place seemed safe enough. Well, I am exceedingly sorry to hear it."

"Anybody suspected?" asked Dr. Tabernacle. "The servants?"

Veryan handed him the paper.

"Had they any visitors in the house?" asked Miss Walker.

"I think not," answered Veryan. "Visitors are rare at Camelot. I must write to Lord Llwydiarth at once, and see if I can be of any use."

The paper was then passed from hand to hand, as the party resumed their walk, and the burglary at Camelot Towers formed one of the principal topics of conversation at dinner-time that evening.

CHAPTER XII.

"THAT MAN HAS GOT A SECRET."

Now Miss Jorkaway, unlike most adventuresses, was not a very self-seeking person. She pursued her quarry more from love of the chase than from a fondness for game, as we have already observed. It cannot be denied, however, that the contrast between her present luxurious surroundings and the sordid atmosphere of cheap boarding-houses struck her very forcibly. Clearly it was her interest to prolong her stay at Cherryfield Hall by every means in her power, and she more than once caught herself meditating upon the possible and natural events which, should they occur, would inevitably lead to her dismissal. So far she had played her cards well. She had made herself useful to Mrs. Cherryfield, she had gained Cynthia's warm regard, and she was by no means unpopular with the others. But circumstances were not all under her control; for instance, the Cherryfields might go abroad (though that was scarcely probable), Nora or somebody else might scheme against her, or the whole family might, from

some unforeseen cause, come to consider her *de trop*. All these were of course possibilities, and no more; the consideration which weighed most heavily with her, and caused her real uneasiness, was that Cynthia might marry, and in that case her occupation would be gone for ever. It was therefore not to be wondered at if she began to regard Mr. Veryan with an unusually suspicious eye. His attractive manners and exceedingly handsome face could scarcely fail to have an effect upon her pupil, and she watched them both most anxiously to see whether there were any incipient signs of feeling upon either side. Something of Cynthia's expression when they returned from that walk to the encampment attracted her attention, and she fancied she detected a slight, subtle change in the demeanour of the two towards each other. This startled and discomposed her, and she immediately awoke to the necessity of finding out all she could about the man himself.

The pretensions of Hugh Crotchett, of course, filled her with no alarm; Cynthia would never be attracted by such a clod as he. On the contrary, his evident *penchant* was in favour of her own interests, for she might arouse his jealousy, and make him her ally. In that direction, at any rate, she had nothing whatever to fear.

At first she listened to the story of the burglary with no more than the interest felt in it by every one. Then a dark suspicion—or, as she herself expressed it, a flash of inspiration—came across her mind.

No one knew who Veryan was, how he lived, or where he spent his time. He was a man who, thanks to his marvellous natural fascination, passed a large proportion of each year in other people's houses. With all his grace, his gaiety, and his apparent candour, he never uttered a word that threw the faintest light upon his past history or his present means. An adventurer, then, he must be; something worse he might possibly be. On one occasion he had let slip the admission that he had once been out of England for ten years at a stretch. Was that true, now?—thought Miss Jorkaway. What if his disappearance had been due to something discreditable; something criminal, even? What if he had been in prison during those ten years? And if so——

Then Miss Jorkaway, furnished with a working hypothesis, began to argue deductively; and, marshalling the few facts at her command, strove to bring them into harmony with it. She started with the theory—purely provisional of course—that the accomplished Carr Veryan, Esq., confessedly of No Hall, Nowhere, was nothing else than an accomplished and gentlemanly cracksman. He was clever, audacious, unscrupulous; he used others for his evil purposes, keeping himself in the background, directing their movements, and sharing in their plunder; being all the while entirely above suspicion himself as the honoured guest of some of the best families in England. And now came this daring

burglary at a house where he had recently been staying, a house the interior of which was perfectly familiar to him, even the secret places where the stolen goods were kept having been made known to him by their too confiding owner! Veryan's own public and candid avowal of his intimacy with these details was of course only a proof of his superhuman cunning, and designed to avert suspicion by its unnecessary frankness and spontaneity. Miss Jorkaway had once read a thrilling novel called 'The Mystery of the Morass,' and the hint contained in it had not been thrown away upon her. The more she pondered the more convinced she felt of the truth of her discovery. True? It must be true. The theory was too artistic not to be true. And Cynthia should never marry a burglar, or anybody else for that matter, while she, Miss Jorkaway, mounted guard.

These thoughts came into her mind as the unconscious Veryan, seated out of sight in the conservatory, was improvising most divinely on the violin. Then she began to wonder whether it would be better to drop a hint of her suspicions to some person likely to be interested in the subject, or to lay a trap for Veryan. Finally she decided to take the latter step, and shape her future course by the result.

The receipt, two days later, from Lord Llwydiarth of a courteous and dignified reply to Veryan's letter afforded her the opportunity she wanted. The con-

versation once more turned upon the burglary—the usual clue, Lord Llwydiarth said, being already in the hands of the police; whereupon Miss Jorkaway, with a particularly engaging smile, remarked—

"Are not such robberies almost always traced either to servants, or to some *other* inmates of the house who are familiar with the places where the things are kept?"

"It very often happens so, I believe," Veryan replied carelessly. Miss Jorkaway looked keenly at him, but he was buttering his toast at the moment, and did not see her glance. "Afraid to meet my eye!" thought the astute lady, and sipped her coffee with an air of triumph. The only persons who appeared to see any point in her remark were Hugh and Lady Marian. The latter raised her eyebrows in mild surprise at its bad taste; Hugh raised his as though, by Jove, there might be something in it—she was a shrewd woman, was Miss Jorkaway. And Miss Jorkaway noticed the difference. She came to another decision. She decided to broach the subject to Hugh, who, as a rival of Veryan's, would naturally be as much interested in the pursuit as she was herself.

"And yet I don't know—I don't know," Hugh muttered doubtfully, when Miss Jorkaway had placed the facts before him and asked to what they pointed. They were walking in the shrubberies, and he was pulling at his pipe as usual. "After all, Veryan's a

rattling good sort, and don't give himself any airs. I don't believe myself I've got much cause to love him, but it's a serious matter when one comes to suspecting a gentleman like him of burglary. All the same it does look queer, you know—just a bit; there's not a doubt of that."

"Ah, my dear Mr. Crotchett, you're like all the rest of your sex," replied Miss Jorkaway. "You won't believe that two and two make four unless you take two marbles and put them together with two other marbles and then count them; whereas we women, you know, arrive at the same result intuitively—in a sort of flash, as it were. In the present case it's your own good heart that prevents your believing in the possibility of an agreeable man being a bad one; for he *is* an agreeable man—I'm candour itself, and I allow that he can be delightful when he likes—and there's somebody else who thinks so too, unless I'm much mistaken. Now what do you, for instance, *know* about this charming Mr. Veryan?"

"I know no more than you do," confessed Hugh slowly.

"And nobody else knows anything!" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway impressively. "And that's just the reason why we should watch him carefully. Depend upon it, *that man has got a secret.* There's a mystery about him. I don't deny he's fascinating. I'm only a woman, and therefore weak; and I don't mind confessing that it's his charm of manner, and nothing else, that has somehow made me forgive

the extraordinary way he treated me when I first caught him trespassing in the park. You see the dear Squire is so unworldly, and so unsuspicious, that we really owe him the duty of protecting his interests. I, you know, am actually in his service, and I consider it part of what I'm paid for. As Cynthia's governess, too——"

Hugh started, and a frown gathered on his face.

"Ah, that touches you, does it?" cried the governess, catching at her chance. "Then let me tell you, Mr. Crotchett, that I've got a pair of eyes in my head, and can see pretty well in what direction things are tending. Veryan's been making love to Cynthia, and unless you wish to be cut out you'd better be on the *qui vive*. I'm only a governess, I know, but *I* don't want to see that sweet girl sacrificed to an adventurer of whom nobody knows anything. A word to the wise, you know; it isn't necessary for me to say more."

"Veryan's beyond me, I confess," said Hugh, puffing fiercely at his pipe. "I caught him the other day reading a book. It was printed in letters all turned backwards, and he was reading it upside down. As soon as he saw me he shut it up and put it in his pocket. That looked queer, now, didn't it?"

"Most suspicious!" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway with a solemn air. "It must have been some cypher, or secret code. Evidently he's in league with dangerous characters of some sort: conspirators, perhaps, like the Carbonari or the Nihilists. Letters printed

want to be interrupted," he rejoined. "Hugh, will you come for a walk with me as far as Greygoose Farm?"

Miss Jorkaway darted a look at Hugh which said, plainly enough, "Go! You'll never have such another chance." Hugh somewhat sheepishly assented, and the three bent their steps towards the house, Miss Jorkaway deploring the fate that had thrown so fair an opportunity in someone else's hands. She could only hope that Veryan would do or say something that even Hugh, with all his stupidity and hesitation, would be able to turn to account; and with that she had to be content.

As soon as she had seen the two safely started on their walk she went straight into the drawing-room, where the sound of many voices was heard. The Rector had called to pay his respects to the Squire's guests, and Miss Jorkaway forthwith took up her position at the tea-table—a position she had learnt to value. Mr. Giles greeted her with his usual unceremonious courtesy as she passed him, and then resumed the thread of his conversation.

"Yes, I don't know what the world's coming to," he said with a portentous shake of the head. "Down here, you know, in this quiet little country place, we're not disturbed by political storms; but we can't help hearing what's going on in the great centres, and it seems to me the nations are on the eve of a big crisis. Look at Russia. That attempted assassination of the Czar shows what a volcano

Russia really is—a sort of charged shell, in fact, where an explosion may break out any day. I wouldn't be the Czar, now, for ten times the Czar's dominions. Then there's the Socialistic movement in Germany, and now that Bismarck's shelved what guarantee have we of any permanent stability? Why, it seems to me——"

"Oh, but all that is simply the natural result of despotism," said Mrs. St. Paul. "The Czar would never need fear assassination if he were to give his subjects something in the shape of a Constitution. Besides, the anti-dynastic movement is confined, after all, to a very small section of the community, and each attempt is followed by the execution or banishment of probably a far greater number of persons than were really implicated in it."

"It's all very dreadful," observed Lady Crotchett. "I feel extremely thankful that we have no Nihilists or people of that sort in England."

"Don't be too sure of that," said the Rector, helping himself to a Nebuchadnezzar sandwich. "I know of at least three Nihilists who live within ten miles of the Royal Exchange in London."

"Within ten miles of the Royal Exchange!" exclaimed Lady Crotchett with a start that upset some of her tea into the saucer.

"Ay," said Mr. Giles, equably. "Refugees, you know. And you may be sure they are not idle. It's even said that the last attempt upon the Czar's life was directed from England. There are secret agents

here—that's a well-known fact. Of course no one knows who they are. The refugees are known, because they give lectures and write articles in the magazines; but the men who *act* are neither known nor suspected, though they keep up a constant correspondence with their chiefs, and help to find money for carrying on the campaign in Russia. Believe me, Lady Crotchett, there are parts of England that are a perfect hotbed of secret political intrigue."

"We Londoners have to come to the country, after all, to learn what's going on," observed Miss Walker, sipping her tea. "Miss Jorkaway, I'll trouble you for just one more lump of sugar."

Miss Jorkaway was so intent upon the conversation that she let the sugar-tongs fall with a clatter. She complied with Miss Walker's demand, and then turned her head once more towards Mr. Giles.

"And do you really mean to say that we are liable to meet these spies, or conspirators, or whatever they are, in our own society?" asked Lady Marian, a little real anxiety showing itself in her voice.

"I honestly believe we are," replied the Rector. "And if all one reads is true, they are the very persons who seem the most beyond suspicion."

"What a very disturbing idea!" cried Miss Walker with assumed horror. "Dr. Tabernacle, I do hope and trust you're not an assassin in disguise?"

"Better ask my patients," answered the doctor with a grim chuckle.

"Sir Thomas, I appeal to you," resumed Miss Walker. "Will you assure me that your real name doesn't end in 'off' or 'insky'?—Really, Mr. Giles, you are sowing the seeds of suspicion and distrust all round; we shall none of us feel certain of our best friends after this. Mrs. St. Paul, I shall be on my guard with *you*, I can assure you. I always thought there was something mysterious in your manner. What a world we live in, to be sure!"

Cynthia, Nora, and Lady Marian laughed.

"Ahem." Sir Thomas cleared his throat. "The good humoured sallies of our friend Miss Walker cannot but commend themselves to all who appreciate the humorous side of a subject in itself momentous; and the Rector will no doubt acknowledge the justice of this remark, however deeply he may be convinced of the truth of his allegations. At the same time, Miss Walker, we must remember that, according to Arago, the man who, outside of pure mathematics, pronounces the word 'impossible,' lacks prudence; and when we consider the crimes of violence that are of such constant occurrence among us, and the considerable proportion of these that are never satisfactorily explained, I think we must admit that there may exist in our midst an undercurrent of intrigue, conspiracy, sedition, call it what you will, of which no signs are visible. Of course I am dealing with the question from an academic standpoint simply; I have no experience in such affairs myself."

Miss Jorkaway's cheeks tingled. She, and she alone, had hit upon one of the culprits. Oh, had he only happened to be there!

She took advantage of a pause which followed Sir Thomas's little speech. "Crimes of violence!" she murmured. "That robbery at Lord Llwydiarth's, for instance. I wonder whether the mystery of that will ever be revealed!"

"Ah!" said the Rector. "The last accounts don't throw much light upon it. All the police say is that it must have originated with somebody who was in the house, and knew where the jewels and things were kept."

"They say that, do they?" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway.

The Rector nodded, and passed Lady Marian's cup for some more tea. Just then Mrs. Cherryfield, who had been out when Mr. Giles arrived, came in, and the conversation took another turn. But Miss Jorkaway had heard enough. The tide was flowing in favour of her cherished theory, and she dispensed the tea with a heart bounding with delight.

Now since the arrival of the house-party Mrs. Cherryfield had begun gradually to let Miss Jorkaway take a share of the responsibilities of housekeeping off her hands, and Cynthia's course of reading had been somewhat interrupted in consequence. The duty of helping to entertain her guests made, as was natural, further inroads upon Cynthia's studies; still, she managed to snatch an hour or two

every now and then, and on this particular afternoon, having nothing else to do, the two closeted themselves together upstairs with their books as soon as the Rector had departed. This was a severe trial to Miss Jorkaway in her excited state, and Cynthia did not fail to observe her preoccupation. A chapter of Adam Smith was duly read, however, and discussed; the discussion passed by insidious stages from political economy to other cognate topics, and finally turned upon the Rector's view of social conditions in Russia and elsewhere. This gave Miss Jorkaway the opportunity she wanted.

"It all seems to me perfectly ridiculous," said Cynthia, putting a mark in Adam Smith and shutting up the book. "I don't believe in it one scrap."

"You don't believe that casual acquaintances may turn out to be very dangerous characters?" rejoined the governess with a portentous look.

"Oh, in novels, perhaps," answered Cynthia carelessly. "But dear me, if we all went about the world suspecting everybody of being a spy or an anarchist or whatever you call them, we should never have any friends at all. We *must* take people on trust. I'm awfully fond of the dear old Rector, as you know, but I think he's an old goose all the same."

"Cynthia, be warned," said Miss Jorkaway, shaking a lead pencil at her solemnly. "The Rector's a man of ve-ry wide experience, and his words are not to be lightly treated."

"Be warned?" repeated Cynthia, opening her eyes in astonishment. "What in all the world can you mean?"

Miss Jorkaway felt that she had made a foolish remark. "Oh, I don't mean anything in particular," she said, as she rose to put away the books. "But we are all liable to meet people of whom we know nothing, and it's very risky if one gets too intimate. I've seen a good deal of the world, you know, and sometimes I've had reason to regret having placed confidence in plausible strangers. Even here——"

"Why, you're as bad as old Virtue!" cried unsuspicious Cynthia, laughing. "I don't think we're likely to harbour any dangerous characters at Cherryfield. Ah, there are Mr. Veryan and Hugh, coming up the avenue. I was wondering where they were."

Miss Jorkaway said nothing more; indeed, she was now only too anxious to see her fellow-conspirator, and hear his report. She accordingly left the room and went hastily downstairs, her lips tightly pressed together and a look of purpose gleaming in her eyes. The two men had entered, and were just parting at the hall door. Veryan strolled into the library, shutting the door behind him; Hugh turned towards the garden, and thither Miss Jorkaway followed with swift and catlike step.

"Well?" she whispered in an eager tone.

"What?" asked Hugh, mighty unresponsively.

"Why, what have you found out?" returned Miss Jorkaway. "Did he say anything? Did you catch

sight of that book again? You surely didn't have your walk for nothing, did you?"

Hugh turned his eyes upon her with a blank stare. "I don't think I know what you mean," he said stupidly. "Are you talking of Veryan? I didn't pump him, if you mean that; I hadn't a chance. We were talking of all sorts of things."

"The boy's an idiot," thought Miss Jorkaway in a suppressed rage. Then aloud—"But surely you remember what we were saying, Mr. Crotchett, just as he came up. I've heard something more, since—something that confirms our suspicions most remarkably. I'll tell you all about it later on. Didn't you even find out anything about that book?"

"No, he never referred to it," answered Hugh. "We were talking of other matters altogether. And look here, Miss Jorkaway; I don't know what you may have heard, but I for one don't see much reason to believe that Veryan's a shady lot. He was awfully jolly to me this afternoon. I feel rather a fool with most people, but Veryan somehow brightens one up, you know. *I* don't see what's wrong about him. I expect you're on the wrong tack after all."

"Ah, he's too clever for you!" retorted Miss Jorkaway with an angry smile, her cheeks flushing with disappointment. "Oh, Mr. Crotchett, to think that he should have got round you so easily! I only wish *I*'d had your chance, that's all. Well, we shall see who's right. The day may come when you'll look on me as your best friend, in spite of your delusion

now; that is, if you really care for somebody as much as you say you do."

She turned away, leaving Hugh puzzled and discomposed. Certainly he felt he had some cause to be jealous of Veryan; and yet the man was so strangely winning that it was difficult to suspect him of evil, and the confidence he inspired placed any rival at a disadvantage. Hugh thought that his best plan would be to leave the whole affair to Miss Jorkaway. If there was really anything to be found out, she was the person to do it; if not, she would only make herself ridiculous, and nobody else would be hurt.

CHAPTER XIII.

HUGH WAXES CONFIDENTIAL.

THE evening passed uneventfully enough. Veryan played to them for an hour or so, and then Dr. Tabernacle, Lady Marian, Miss Walker, and Squire Cherryfield sat down to whist. The governess, chilled and disappointed by Hugh's indifference, would have found the position intolerable had it not been that a new idea just now occurred to her, which gave her fresh hopes of victory. She remembered that there was one other member of the household, beside herself, who deeply distrusted Veryan. This was old Virtue, the half-crazy woman as she called her. Absurd as the old servant's superstitions were, the curious hatred of Veryan which resulted from them was undeniably in harmony with her own views, and in Virtue she would doubtless find a valuable and willing coadjutor. Every day that passed offered fresh proof to her mind that Veryan had designs on Cynthia, and that Cynthia was far from feeling indifferent to him; and this pointed to a consummation that would send her adrift upon the world again

unless it could be averted. She therefore decided to take Virtue Sexton into her confidence, and prove the superiority of two heads over one.

Now Hugh, as it happened, had taken an unusual quantity of wine at dinner, and this invariably made him loquacious, expansive, and obstinate. As soon as the ladies had retired for the night, then, he insisted upon Veryan accompanying him into the smoking-room for a social pipe and glass. It was a good-sized, comfortably-furnished apartment, with a thick Turkey carpet and large low easy-chairs of more than ordinary insidiousness; and Veryan, as he sank lazily into the soft depths of one of them, and stretched out his legs in luxurious enjoyment of its restfulness, certainly looked as little like a conspirator or a burglar as one could well imagine. Hugh ensconced himself opposite, and the two were soon smoking peacefully. Then Hugh said, with some abruptness—

"I say, we want some liquor. What's your particular tap?"

"I'll have a brandy and seltzer," replied Veryan, touching the bell.

"Gin and water 'll do for me," said Hugh, as the tray came in. "I went in for training once—a year or so ago—and had to knock off everything. I've never tried it since, and don't intend to—'tain't good enough." Here the youth poured himself out a stiff glassful, and drank half of it at a gulp. "I think water's beastly. I'm like the horse, you know, in the

proverb. One man may bring me to the water, but ten can't make me drink."

Veryan laughed. "It's much the same with me," he said, sipping a great goblet of sparkling pale-gold liquid, "only I put it differently. One man can make me drink—as you are, now—but ten couldn't take me to the water, unless I'm thirstier than I've ever been yet. Isn't the doctor coming in to-night?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," said Hugh, rather thickly.

"He's a delightful old fellow," remarked Veryan, pressing down the tobacco in his pipe. "I'm afraid, however, he doesn't appreciate his advantages."

"What advantages?" asked Hugh in his stolid way.

"He's not sufficiently grateful for the interest taken in him by Mrs. St. Paul," said Veryan, dryly. "A charming person, that."

"What, the devil!" exclaimed Hugh, taking another gulp. "Do you mean to say you admire that woman?"

"Profoundly," answered Veryan. "I always admire clever women. But I admire Miss Jorkaway still more."

Hugh glanced quickly at his companion, with a start. Veryan, however, was smoking lazily as before, giving no sign of any unusual interest.

"And she's so amusing," he resumed. "You should cultivate Miss Jorkaway. Her genius for penetration is remarkable."

Hugh's intellect was not very bright at the best of times, and just now it was somewhat muzzier than usual. But this observation made him feel vaguely uncomfortable. "I can't altogether make her out," he said. "She's a very curious person."

"Extremely curious," assented Veryan, regarding Hugh with an amused look out of the corner of his eye. "It's a pity her curiosity can't be always gratified, isn't it?"

Hugh flushed hotly. Even his obtuse perceptions suggested to him the possibility of Veryan's having overheard something of their conversation that afternoon, and he was at a loss what to say. "I don't suppose it matters," he muttered at last. "She's only Cynthia's governess."

"Doesn't even that make her interesting to you?" asked Veryan carelessly.

"That's not fair," growled Hugh, pouring out some more gin.

"Why not?" laughed Veryan. "Is the subject a delicate one? I meant nothing, I assure you. Miss Jorkaway is a remarkable woman, and an excellent subject for speculation, if not for study. Of course I know nothing of her antecedents, so I'm at liberty to wonder what she really is. Governesses are sometimes very mysterious creatures, you know. I remember once reading of one who turned out to be—a Russian spy!"

Hugh did not see the bright gleam of fun which

twinkled in Veryan's eye as he said this. His consternation was now complete; it was clear to him that Veryan knew all about the conspiracy that the governess was hatching, and he felt momentarily thankful that his own part in it had been so insignificant. And yet he could not be quite sure. Veryan might really be in earnest; he might be trying to shield himself by suggesting suspicion against the woman who had detected him; he might—but there was no end to the possibilities of the situation. Hugh felt himself checkmated, and took refuge in generalities and another gulp of gin. "I'm sure I don't know anything about it," he said confusedly. "It's nothing to me what the woman is."

"Nor to me, in the very least," added Veryan frankly.

A pause ensued, during which Hugh appeared to fall into a brown study. His flushed face bore witness to the unusual depth of his potations, and a frown which gathered on his brow indicated the rise of angry feelings. He began to look quarrelsome; rather as though he were spoiling for a fight, and was at a loss how to open the campaign. Veryan watched him without appearing to do so, smoking silently the while. Then he turned his head ever so slightly towards him, and said—

"Well?"

"Well what?" grunted Hugh, sulkily.

"What are you thinking about?" asked the other.

For a moment or two Hugh made no reply, but continued smoking fiercely with his eyes fixed upon the ceiling. At last he said, in a disagreeably abrupt manner—

"Look here, Veryan; I didn't at all relish a remark of yours just now."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Veryan. "Why, which was it?"

"You said something about Cynthia," replied Hugh. "Something about my being interested in Miss Jorkaway because she was Cynthia's governess. I'm not such a fool that I can't see what you mean, and it struck me that the insinuation was in damned bad taste."

"You're too sensitive," said Veryan with a smile. "Never be too sensitive; you show your hand, you know. But I meant nothing, I assure you. If my remark offended you, I apologize most sincerely."

"Oh, that's all right," muttered Hugh. "I hate scenes. Let's drop it. You're not half a bad fellow, you know, Veryan, and I'd say things to you I wouldn't say to everybody." Here he replenished his glass. "Look here—I want to put a case to you."

"Say on," said Veryan, smoking tranquilly.

"Well," resumed Hugh, with another gulp at his liquor, "you know more about things than I do—and look here, now. Of course I'm only putting a case. Suppose there are two men both after the

same girl. They each discover the other fellow's game, and of course they know she can't marry both and that one's got to give way. Now what I want to know is, how they're to arrange it. Which of 'em ought to retire—the one who fell in love last, or who ?"

Veryan raised his eyebrows. "I don't see why either of them should retire,'" he said, quietly.

"No?" answered Hugh. "But it seems to me one of 'em must. My idea is this—the chap as is first in the field ought to run th' show; and if the fellow as chips in afterwards finds th' other fellow before him, he ought to take a back seat. Course, they might toss up. I b'lieve that's done sometimes. But if they've both been makin' up to th' girl there might be some difficulty about it, and neither 'd want t' give way himself. Some chaps 'ud fight it out—I don't know, I'm sure. Now what d'you say? What's the straight tip in such a case?"

"There's no difficulty," said Veryan. "Neither need retire in favour of the other, for the simple reason that the decision doesn't rest with either. Each has his chance, good or bad, to start with, and after all you can scarcely dispose of a young lady in the same way as you would toss for drinks. Let each man do his best for himself, and leave it to the girl to decide."

"Leave it to the girl!" exclaimed Hugh, as though struck by a new light.

"Certainly," replied Veryan. "I suppose she

ought to have a say in the matter, you know—it sounds only fair that she should."

"H'm!" grunted Hugh, in tipsy thoughtfulness. "Well—p'raps she ought. I don't know as I ever saw it in that light before. Of course, as I said, I'm only putting a case."

Veryan smiled slightly, half-divining the truth. "I'm sure you'll have many such chances," he said kindly. "A man in your position, and with your prospects——"

"What d'you know about my position and prospects?" interrupted Hugh.

"Nothing but what I see," returned Veryan. "You belong to a wealthy family, you bear an honoured name——"

"Stow that!" shouted Hugh, suddenly starting to his feet. He was very drunk by this time, and Veryan's words seemed to have produced a fit of the wildest and most unaccountable excitement. His face grew redder than ever, his eyes looked bloodshot, and his hair fell in a tumbled mass upon his forehead. "What the devil are you driving at?" he blurted out in a rage. "Are you trying to pump me? Because"—he stopped short for a minute, trembling with an emotion that puzzled Veryan exceedingly. "What do you know about me, after all? What have you heard? D'you mean to say the Crotchetts"—with a sharply suspicious look—"no, 'tain't likely, either. There, I've made a fool of myself as usual," he concluded, sinking once more

into his chair. "And yet—you're not a bad sort, you know, Veryan, and by G— I've half a mind to tell you something; by G—, I have indeed."

Veryan looked at him in sheer bewilderment and perplexity. These sudden changes of mood were inexplicable. What was coming? He paused a moment, and then said, very quietly—

"Don't tell me anything if you're likely to think better of it to-morrow morning, you know, Hugh."

"To-morrow morning be damned," cried Hugh with a reckless air. "I *will* tell you. I've borne it long enough, and I suppose I've got feelings same as other fellows, haven't I? There are some things no fellow can be expected to carry all by himself—he wants another chap to talk to about 'em, somehow. Besides, you're clever, and all that—and you shall help *me*, because I know you're a good sort and you've seen a thing or two. So here goes—and Miss Jorkaway may go to the devil, where she belongs."

"It has nothing to do with Miss Jorkaway?" asked Veryan, surprised.

"Miss Jorkaway's a jackass," responded Hugh incisively. "No—and I'm blowed if I'll listen to her nonsense any more. Now, Veryan, this is a dead secret—a dead secret between you and me. You say I belong to a wealthy family and all the rest of it. Now—sit tight, old man—that's just where you're mistaken. I don't belong to anything of the sort, and my name's no more Crotchett than yours is."

"Good Heavens! You astonish me," exclaimed Veryan, taking his pipe from his lips. "I thought you were a distant relation of Sir Thomas's!"

Hugh passed his hand over his forehead. "That's what everybody thinks," he said moodily, "but it isn't true. I don't know why I'm telling you this, I'm sure—I've never told anybody else. Perhaps I'm a fool for doing it. But I must tell somebody, and somehow I don't mind so much letting *you* into the secret. I don't really belong to the Crotchett family at all. I'm a sort of adopted member of it."

"Go on," said Veryan gently, as he paused.

"It's all very well to say 'go on,' but that isn't the worst of it," continued Hugh, biting the mouthpiece of his pipe viciously and staring hard in front of him. "I'm one of those fellows—G—! it makes me mad to think of it all—who have no right to their own existence. The plain truth is that my father was an infernal scoundrel, who first ruined my mother and then deserted her. It's my firm belief that the man's alive now, and *I'm on the look-out for him.* You remember that novel of old Marryat's, 'Japhet in Search of a Father'? Well, I'm a sort of Japhet. I'm on the look-out for *my* father, and if ever I come across him he'll have to settle accounts with me. I've never horsewhipped a man yet, but I shall horsewhip him, I promise you."

"Horsewhip your father!" exclaimed Veryan. "What on earth for?"

"For *being* my father," returned Hugh grimly.

"For bringing me into existence, and shaming my mother, to be sure. Isn't it natural that the product of the man's crime should be the instrument of his punishment? I don't know whether that's Bible doctrine, but it's common-sense, anyhow. And I shan't shirk my duty."

Veryan lay back in his chair, for once at a loss for words. He was entirely taken aback at hearing such views from so dull-witted and clumsy-looking a man as Hugh, and sat for some time in silence. There was evidently more in Hugh than he had fancied possible, and he now regarded him with keen interest heightened by a somewhat amused respect. "It is a strange situation altogether," he said at last, musingly. And the strangest part of it, he thought to himself, was that Hugh, suspecting him to be a rival of his own, should have blurted out a confession that was so very detrimental to his own chances. Nothing but intoxication, of course, would account for that. "Have you never heard anything of your father in the meantime? It must be five-and-twenty years, I suppose, since——"

"Five-and-twenty!" repeated Hugh brusquely. "Ah, I look older than I am. It's this rough dark beard of mine—I was always coarse and hairy. But I'm only just nineteen."

Veryan started ever so little, and looked at him scrutinizingly. "Yes, you look much older than your real age," he said. "Of course I shall keep your secret. Very few persons know of it, I suppose?"

"No one but the Crotchetts," answered Hugh.

"Well," resumed Veryan more briskly, after a rather long pause, "at any rate your future is assured. You're in an infinitely better position than most fellows with a history of that sort. To all intents and purposes you're as well off as though you were Sir Thomas's own son, and no possible blame can attach to you for a thing you couldn't help. We were none of us consulted as to the circumstances under which we came into the world, and in that particular you're on precisely the same footing as the best of us."

"Think so?" muttered Hugh, gloomily.

"Of course I think so," returned Veryan. "That's the true philosophy of the thing. What person whose opinion is of the smallest value would dream of holding you in contempt for such a cause?"

"You're an awfully good fellow, Veryan," said Hugh at last. "I don't know what the deuce made me go and blurt all this out to you—I never intended to tell anyone. But now you'll understand me better. You know my history—of course I haven't entered into details—and you know my object in life. People think I'm a fool, and p'r'aps they're not far wrong. And they think I care for nothing but racing and all that sort of thing. There they're mistaken. I'm looking out all the time for the man I told you of, and when I meet him, by all that's holy, I'll—I'll——"

"But, my dear fellow, to horsewhip your own

father for being your father—it's like a French vaudeville!" exclaimed Veryan with a laugh he could no longer repress. "Don't think I'm ridiculing you—I wouldn't ridicule any man who feels strongly and is in downright earnest. But are you sure of your facts? Because you ought to have a pretty strong case to justify you in punishing a man for giving you life. Do you know anything about your father beyond what you've told me?"

"I've one or two clues," replied the other with marked reserve. "What they consist of is *my* secret. But I'll lay any odds that when I meet him, if ever I do, I shall pretty soon find out who he is. And when that happens——"

"Hist!" whispered Veryan, rising noiselessly from his chair. He was not a man upon whom the *frou-frou* of petticoats had the magnetic influence it appears to exercise on some, but there was no doubt that his sudden movement coincided curiously with a faint rustling sound on the other side of the door. When, however, the door was opened there was nothing to be seen, and Veryan might have imagined himself mistaken had not the creak of a flying footstep on the staircase confirmed his incipient suspicion. He said nothing, but, seeing that the coast was clear, closed the door again with a smile and resumed his seat.

Hugh did not appear to have taken any notice of the incident. He rambled on for a few minutes about the subject uppermost in his mind, but added

nothing that threw any fresh light upon it. To Veryan, with his psychological bent, Hugh had acquired considerable interest; he was now worth studying, if only as the pivot, or axis, of a somewhat sordidly romantic history; although it was from the standpoint of pathoscopics rather than from his position as an unusually fortunate waif that he appealed to Veryan's regard. A lumpish youth with no manners and few topics of conversation beyond odds and handicaps may be met with any day; but the deserted son of a deserted mother, who believes himself the appointed instrument of vengeance upon a man for having given him life—who has views, and very practical views too, upon the intrinsic connection between the consequence of a crime and the retribution in store for the criminal—is something far less common. For gossip and scandal and intrigue Veryan cared absolutely nothing; but he was a keen student of human nature, and poor Hugh's tipsy revelation presented him in a light which threw all the coarser features of his character and antecedents into the darkest background.

At last Veryan suggested that they should retire. He had some little difficulty in getting Hugh to move; but it was by that time nearly one o'clock, and Veryan was an early riser. It is said, on high anonymous authority, that the early bird gets the first worm. But there are some birds who do their foraging overnight, and of these Miss Jorkaway was

one. She had not been idle while Hugh and Veryan were holding their confabulation in the smoking-room; and Veryan, as he stepped sleepily upstairs to bed, was blissfully unconscious of the sapping and the mining that had been going on in another part of the house. Miss Jorkaway was not a person to let the grass grow under her feet, and on this particular occasion her manœuvres had been sufficiently venturesome to warrant us in devoting a new chapter to their elucidation.

CHAPTER XIV.

MISS JORKAWAY'S GREAT DISCOVERY.

WHEN bed-time came, and everybody but Hugh and Veryan went upstairs, Miss Jorkaway contrived somehow to linger. She hovered about, putting things back in their places, turning up the hearth-rugs, looking to the fastenings of the window-shutters, extinguishing the lights, and giving one or two quite unnecessary orders to the servants. Then, when the house was quiet, she proceeded in the direction of her own room; to reach which she must needs pass Veryan's, the door of which stood ajar, the gas being alight inside. Now Veryan, she was aware, was safely closeted below with Hugh; and two men, thought Miss Jorkaway very sagely, comfortably provided with drinks and pipes, were pretty sure to remain where they were for half-an-hour at least. All the others were in their bedrooms, and she—well, she was on the way to hers. And the door was open, and the gas burning, and no one could approach without making sufficient noise to warn her; and there, inside, only three or four

yards from where she stood, was a table. Nothing could have been more favourable to her designs. It was a great temptation; too great, indeed, to be resisted, and Miss Jorkaway lost no time in yielding to it. With noiseless steps she glided into the room and looked around her. Everything was orderly and well-appointed; she saw a row of boots and shoes, a few suits of clothes hanging on pegs, a rather handsome toilet-service upon the dressing-table, a cigar-case in silver filigree, and two or three beautifully coloured meerschaum pipes. "H'm!" breathed Miss Jorkaway. "Nothing much so far." Then she glanced at the mantelpiece. "Not a single photograph!" she murmured, with an air of wonder at the absence of those presentments of smirking beauty with which she firmly believed all unmarried men were in the habit of solacing their loneliness. But this was only a preliminary and superficial survey. It was the table that had attracted her, and to this she now turned her attention. It was the only object in the room which had a littered appearance. On it she saw a portable writing-case, carefully shut and locked; a blotting-pad, that bore marks of considerable use; a dozen or so heterogeneous books, comprising 'Un Saint' and 'Le Disciple' by Bourget, a psychological treatise by Sully, a German work on medical jurisprudence by Professor Ulrichs, Lotze's 'Microcosmus,' Amiel's 'Journal,' and so on; a large double inkstand, an opera-glass, and a goodly jar of the best navy-cut

tobacco. For a moment or two Miss Jorkaway looked very much disconcerted. There was nothing here, at any rate, upon which she could lay hold; nothing which shed the faintest ray of light upon the object of her investigations. Her eye roamed eagerly and anxiously over the table, as though searching for something she was sure must be there although she could not see it. At last she moved a broad, thin book that appeared to be resting in front of something else. Audacity and perseverance were after all to reap their due reward. A gleam of triumph flashed across her face, and with the air of a successful detective she pounced upon the mysterious green volume that she had seen Veryan studying so furtively that afternoon!

She held it, now, in her very hands. The secret code—the private register of seditious or burglarious enterprises — the strange collection of characters printed backwards or upside down, that Hugh had described to her—was actually in her possession. Her heart beat fast with excitement as she threw a glance over her shoulder to make sure that she was still alone; then, with a quick movement, she opened the fateful leaves. Yes! Hugh had not been wrong. There were the strange, distorted characters. And the broad margins of each page were covered with pencil-memoranda in still stranger script, which puzzled her even more than the foreign type. Her eye wandered over the irregular lines of dashes, dots, and curves in bewilderment that was almost

pathetic, and it was only natural that she should jump at once to the conclusion that they must be a form of cypher, known only to the initiated, and conveying some hidden, cabalistic signification. Then she glanced at the foreign print once more. It now presented a certain aspect of familiarity to her. That was not the first time that she had seen it. Could it be Greek?—Coptic?—Manchu? No —she knew what Greek looked like; Coptic she had seen once at the British Museum; and Manchu, she had heard, was written in vertical columns. Suddenly the truth flashed upon her. The mysterious book was in Russian!

This discovery, harmonising so wonderfully with her prior suspicions, and the warnings of the Rector only a few hours previously, startled the governess almost out of her prudence. She had found out more, far more, than she had hoped for in her most sanguine moments. Veryan was in the habit of studying a Russian book on the sly, and of making incomprehensible notes in it in cypher. He had never told any one that he understood the language, and, indeed, had never so much as referred to Russia since his arrival at Cherryfield. That, of itself, showed he had something to hide. Then she had discovered this most suspicious fact on the very day when, by the merest chance, the idea had entered her brain that this dangerously attractive man, of whose antecedents nobody knew anything, might, for all she knew, be a Russian conspirator or a

Russian spy. Miss Jorkaway found additional pleasure, under these happy circumstances, in acknowledging to herself that her earlier suspicions had been in reality quite baseless. "For that makes it all the more striking," she said in her exultation. "I never thought my genius for intuitive penetration was so great. It is almost as though it were a direct inspiration from above!"

The volume fascinated her so much that she could scarcely put it down. But the minutes were passing rapidly, and she had no intention of being caught. She turned the leaves over for the last time, and then glanced at the title-page. Once more she made a discovery—a discovery that caused her to contract her brows, open her eyes wider than ever, and draw in her breath. Another mystery confronted her—the mystery of an entirely unknown name. The inscription, written in a bold and flowing hand, declared the book to be the property of "A. C. Thwaites."

Thwaites! Who was Thwaites? Was not the book Veryan's after all? Or had he bought it secondhand with Thwaites's name in it? This, soliloquised Miss Jorkaway, demanded the most careful and most serious consideration. She would have liked to take counsel's opinion upon the point, but that, of course, was beyond her reach. Rapidly she noted in her retentive memory the questions to be solved. Who *was* Thwaites, to begin with? Were there any relations between Thwaites and Veryan: and, if so, of what nature? How came

Thwaites's book in Veryan's possession? And, supposing Thwaites to be a——

Just then an awful thing occurred. A slow, heavy footstep was heard approaching from outside. Miss Jorkaway's mental processes came to an abrupt stop, and so, for a moment, did her breath. Then, with recovered presence of mind, she quickly dropped the book upon the table, put up her left hand, and turned down the gas. A figure darkened the doorway. She glanced round in terror, and beheld the square, stern face of Virtue Sexton.

"Gracious, how you startled me!" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway considerably relieved. "You should see that the gas isn't left burning like this in the bedrooms, Virtue; it's wasteful, you know. What in the world are you doing, prowling about the house at this time of night?"

"What are *you* a-doin', miss, in this man's room?" retorted Virtue in a dry, hard tone.

"I was just passing, and saw the gas up to the full, so stepped in to turn it lower," replied Miss Jorkaway, perfectly unabashed. "You know how particular Mrs. Cherryfield is, and there's no telling how late it may be before Mr. Veryan comes up."

"It's full late now, miss, for a lady to be in his bedroom," was the old woman's answer. "It must have taken you some time to turn down that gas, for I've passed the door twice already since you went in."

"What!" cried Miss Jorkaway, off her guard.

"Well, I did stop for a moment or two to glance over those books; and a queer lot they are," she added, with a sagacious nod. She hesitated for a second, and then, forming a sudden resolution, said —"Virtue, go into my room; I've something to say to you. I'm just going downstairs to fetch a pencil-case I left in the drawing-room—I shall be back in less than a minute."

She was half-way down the staircase before Virtue could reply, and, to salve what she called her conscience, did go into the pitch-dark drawing-room and grope about in an aimless manner for a pencil-case she had never possessed. Not finding it, she stole stealthily out again, and then did what she had come down to do. She paused at the door of the smoking-room and listened. The voices were loud inside, and she distinctly heard Hugh utter the words—"There they're mistaken. I'm looking out all the time for the man I told you of, and when I meet him——" followed by Veryan's exclamation, "But, my dear fellow, to horsewhip your own father!" The effect upon the eavesdropper was electrical. Thicker and faster were coming the discoveries of that most eventful night. She was too much excited to form any definite theory out of the fragments she had overheard, but they were clear enough, she was not likely to forget them, and there was plenty of time to think over them at her leisure and see how they could be made to fit into an organized and consistent structure. Prudently she

did not linger; indeed, as we know, another moment's delay would have led to her detection, for the rustling of her stiff poplin skirts and the creaking of her stays had already reached Veryan's ears, and she turned and fled precipitately upstairs again just at the critical instant.

She flounced into her bedroom, panting. Virtue was already there, standing in mute wonder at the governess's strange proceedings. She then shut the door carefully, and, sitting down on the edge of her bed, began to collect her thoughts.

"Virtue," she said at last, "I begin to think that you're a far cleverer woman than I am."

"I've had more experience, you see, miss," replied Virtue very gravely.

"To be sure," assented Miss Jorkaway. "Now listen to me. You'll not deny that ever since Mr. Veryan came here you've expressed the opinion that he'd turn out to be a bad man."

"Before he came, you mean," corrected Virtue stolidly.

"Even *before* he came," said Miss Jorkaway with unusual graciousness. "Now I'm free to confess that at first I thought you were romancing. I didn't believe in your intuitions one bit. I considered them nothing but a pack of the sheerest nonsense and imagination. In short, I put you down as an old fool."

"And who are you putting down as an old fool now?" asked Virtue.

"You needn't be too sharp," retorted the governess,

passing a handkerchief over her heated face. "There's no occasion for that sort of thing. I put you down as an old fool—you see I'm candour itself—because I looked upon your dreams and your intuitions as utterly baseless and absurd. I think differently now, because I've had intuitions myself since, and my intuitions have turned out true. I'll go further, and say that I'm almost prepared to recognise in the events of the last few hours the finger of Providence itself."

"Lor, miss, what does the like o' you know about Providence?" exclaimed the old Calvinist, in half-pitying contempt.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, do, or I won't speak another word," snapped Miss Jorkaway, somewhat irritated. "After all, there's nothing much for *you* to boast about. You've found out nothing—all you're good for is to throw out hints and innuendoes that other people can make neither head nor tail of. Now *I* have made discoveries—solid, tangible discoveries — about this mysterious man. There's serious reason to believe that he's a Russian political spy. The Rector was warning us only this afternoon about the number of Russian spies, or conspirators, or something, that are all over England—three hundred in the Royal Exchange alone, I *believe* he said—and I've got what almost amounts to proof positive that this Veryan's just one of them."

"Maybe, miss," replied Virtue briefly. "I ain't got no light on that. And what's he doin' here?"

"That I can't be sure of," said Miss Jorkaway. "You see, these conspirators and people go very roundabout ways to work. It's often extremely difficult to trace any logical connection between their actions and the objects they have in view. I dare say you may have heard about the great jewel-robbery at Lord Llwydiarth's a short time ago." Virtue shook her head, but Miss Jorkaway was too much excited to notice it. "Well, Mr. Veryan was staying there just before it occurred, and Lord Llwydiarth showed him the jewels and the very place where they were kept, and now the police say that the robbery must have been committed with the connivance of some one to whom these things were known. All this looks exceedingly suspicious. With all that open, candid manner of his, he never says one word about himself, and nobody knows who he is, or where he comes from, or how he gets his money. And now I've just found out something else. He's got a secret book printed in Russian, and covered all over in pencil with some private hieroglyphics that nobody but himself can read. Virtue, it's my firm belief that the man's carrying on some deed of darkness here, under this very roof—poor Squire Cherryfield's roof—in the midst of us innocent people. Why, we may be actually blown up in our beds, some fine night, when we least expect it, and then where shall we all be, do you suppose?"

"Ah! That's the question," put in Virtue grimly.

"And therefore," continued Miss Jorkaway "I

consider it my duty, my bounden duty, to keep the closest watch upon his actions. Oh, I haven't told you all yet, or nearly all. There's no longer any doubt in my mind that he's been making love to Cynthia——"

"To Cynthia!" cried the old woman with a terrified expression in her eyes.

"Ah, I've roused you at last, have I," said Miss Jorkaway in a complacent tone. "Yes, to Cynthia; I've had my wits about me, I can tell you, and there's not a question but that the child's more than half in love with him already."

If Virtue had been a Catholic she would have crossed herself, and ejaculated an appeal to the Virgin. Being a Calvinist, she uttered a stifled cry of despair and horror. To her it was the fulfilment of her strange presentiment. The curse had been "determined" and "foreknown," and now it was coming down upon them. Determinate foreknowledge—that awful thing, that no human prayers, no human agony, could ever combat with the slightest prospect of success! She felt herself hedged in. If she appealed to God, she knew beforehand that no words of hers would ever turn Him from His relentless purpose. If she appealed to Cynthia, the child would first laugh at her and then, perchance, get angry. If she appealed to the parents, what proof had she to warrant or excuse her interference? For she was but a servant after all. Then a ray of hope stole over her. Danger was decreed for Cynthia, of

that there was no doubt; but ruin?—that was by no means certain. Cynthia was to be tried by fire, and this fair-faced, wicked man was the appointed instrument; but she had no cause, after all, for supposing that Cynthia was doomed to perish. Her fright, and the suddenness of it, had for the moment clouded her better judgment, obscured her view of things. She sank into the nearest chair, and wiped her forehead with her apron. Her self-control gradually returned.

"Ay, it's bound to go hard with the child," she said at last, in a trembling voice. "You're more in the way o' seein' things than me, miss. I've scarcely seen 'er to speak to these four or five days. I s'pose *you* don't want Cynthia to come to grief by engagin' 'erself to this man any more 'n I do. Can't you do nothin' to prevent it?"

"My good soul, I *am* doing something, am I not?" retorted Miss Jorkaway. "I'm finding out all I can about him, to begin with; for without that of course our hands are tied. At present we've got nothing but suspicion, I grant you, but it's very grave suspicion, and I'm on his track—oh, I'm on the track of many things, I can assure you. There's more going on around us here than you or anybody else have any conception of. Ah, I knew there was no good in the man the very moment I set eyes on him, trespassing and fiddling in the park. I'm wonderfully sharp-sighted—I will say that for myself. And the plausibility of the wretch! Why, he and Mr.

Hugh Crotchett are as thick as thieves. At this very moment I believe he's worming all young Crotchett's family secrets out of him. It's not to be supposed a man like that would take to Hugh for his own sake. I tell you, Virtue——why, what on earth's the matter with the woman now?"

A strange look of eagerness and apprehension again came over Virtue's face. "His family secrets?" she gasped. "What family secrets do you mean?"

Miss Jorkaway nodded her head with a complacent and mysterious air. "Ah, what indeed!" she repeated with something like a chuckle in her voice. "I'm on the track there too. You seem to take a great interest in that boy, Virtue; you told me once he'd got the most beautiful face you ever saw, or something of the sort. There's no accounting for tastes, that's very clear. Perhaps you've been dreaming about him too?"

"There's more than dreams in life," replied Virtue oracularly. "There's memories."

"Memories? Why, you never saw him before, did you?" inquired Miss Jorkaway briskly.

"I can't rightly say," was the old woman's answer. "I'm not sure myself. I s'pose there ain't no chance o' Miss Cynthia takin' to *him*, now, is there?"

"Cynthia? To *Hugh!*" exclaimed the governess with a shrill laugh. "No, Virtue; candidly, I don't think there is. At the same time, I don't see why Hugh shouldn't have his chance of winning

her if he thinks the trial worth making. But I'm very much afraid that Veryan is first favourite. The only thing to do is to make such a match impossible."

Virtue settled her hands upon her knees, and looked gloomily in front of her. Miss Jorkaway crossed her legs, and swung her foot to and fro. A silence which lasted some minutes supervened.

"Ay, we must know more about him afore we can do anything," said Virtue at length. "Your pryin' ways 'll come in fine and useful here, miss. The Lord maketh the wrath o' man to praise 'im, and maybe 'e'll be pleased to use the curiousness o' woman for the same purpose. Anyhow, one mustn't look too close at the instrument when there's a good object to be gained. If the Lord didn't scruple to use a lyin' spirit to deceive Ahab, I don't see what call anyone has——"

"Are you referring to *me?*" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway, looking up in astonishment. "How dare you compare me to a lying spirit, and accuse me of prying ways! Upon my word, you are a most extraordinary creature. I don't believe you know half the time what you're saying. To insult *me* like this, when we've one object in view, and I'm the only person who can do anything to gain it! I've more than half a mind to give the whole thing up, and leave you to shift for yourself!"

"Ye'll do just as the Lord wills," replied Virtue, perfectly unmoved. "If He chooses to use you as

an instrument, He'll do it without asking your permission, miss. I don't know myself whether you're chosen for this work, or me. He ain't given me no word o' that yet. But whichever it is the work 'll be done, ye may be sure o' that. I don't believe myself as the Lord has decreed Cynthia's ruin, and 'e'll raise up 'is own instrument to deliver 'er out o' the trial as is in store for 'er."

Miss Jorkaway had a pretty shrewd idea who that instrument would be; for it is scarcely necessary to say that she entertained not the remotest intention of giving up the chase. Indeed, the irritation caused by Virtue's impertinence decided her to keep the game more than ever in her own hands, and only employ Virtue in the event of absolute necessity. It was a mistake, after all, to place too much confidence in others. Hugh, for instance, had allowed himself to be beguiled altogether by the enemy, and was no longer to be depended on unless she could work upon his jealousy; and now here was Virtue, offering no practical assistance whatever, and indulging moreover in the abominable insolence of calling her a lying spirit! Besides, she was fighting for her own hand, fighting to prevent the threatened occurrence of that which would deprive her of her new, luxurious, comfortable surroundings and send her into the sordid world of boarding-houses again; and in this she would stand alone—as long, at any rate, as she was able.

"Well, that will do for to-night," she said with an

air of dignified reserve as she rose and approached her dressing-table. "If you wish to take any steps in the matter, of course I can't prevent you. But I should advise your consulting *me*. I am accustomed to act with caution and a certain amount of tact, whereas you, you know, are apt to put people's backs up by your very extraordinary remarks. As for this man Veryan, or Thwaites, or whatever his real name may be——"

"What's that?" cried Virtue, springing from her seat

"What's *what?*" echoed the governess irritably.

"That name—that other name," said Virtue, trembling visibly with excitement. She stood like a woman transfixed, her gray eyes glittering like a cat's, her left hand clenched, her breath coming short and quick. "Thwaites? Did you say the name o' Thwaites?"

"Well, what if I did say Thwaites?" replied Miss Jorkaway, ready to bite her tongue out; for she had intended to keep that discovery to herself. "I meant nothing. I said, whatever his name is—Veryan, or Thwaites, or Snooks, or Potts——"

"That won't do, miss," persisted the old woman, coming a step nearer. "You did mean something. You mayn't 'ave meant to let it out, but you done it anyhow. I don't leave your room this night till you tell me where you got that name."

"But what has it to do with you, I should like to know?" inquired the governess, now entirely off her guard.

"Where did you get that name, I ask?" repeated Virtue sternly.

Miss Jorkaway forthwith began to struggle with her hooks and eyes, producing no small crepitation in the process. "I entirely deny your right to ask any such question," she said with an attempted show of independence. "I've told you all you've any right to know, and more too. Just rest satisfied with that, and go to bed. It's nearly one o'clock, and time we were all asleep."

Here Miss Jorkaway gaped, and proceeded with her undressing at accelerated speed. Virtue, however, remained immovable. "You refuse to tell me?" she said in a tone of stolid menace.

"I refuse to say another word," replied Miss Jorkaway, beginning to let down her back hair.

"Then I'll go at once and ask the man 'imself," said Virtue, preparing to leave the room.

"Stop!" cried Miss Jorkaway, turning suddenly. This would never do; it would spoil her own game completely, it might even lead to the detection of her prying invasion of Veryan's room. "There—you needn't attach such importance to it as all that. I came across the name in that book of his, written on the titlepage—A. C. Thwaites. It was that that put it into my head. I don't suppose it matters very much. And now, please, let me go to bed."

Virtue did not appear to hear this last request. She stood like a statue—rigid and immovable—with a rapt, wondering expression on her face.

Then her eyes closed, and her lips moved as though in prayer.

"I've got the message, miss," she said at last, in a far-off, strangely quiet voice. "It's me as is to be the instrument, not you. Your part's over and done with. Just leave the rest to me."

She turned and went without another word, leaving Miss Jorkaway, her hairbrush elevated and her eyes wide open, speechless with astonishment, and wild with curiosity and envy.

CHAPTER XV.

THE INSIDIOUS VERYAN.

HUGH CROTCHETT woke up next morning with two very uneasy sensations; one physical, the other mental. In the first place he had a terrible attack of hot coppers. His tongue was parched, his head throbbed, and he had a remarkably disagreeable taste in his mouth. In the second place he was a prey to that most uncomfortable feeling—the impression that he had given himself away overnight. He knew he was always a dangerous blab when the liquor was in him—to quote his own not very refined way of putting it—and he now suffered all those pangs of self-humiliation and remorse to which we have none of us, perhaps, been strangers at some time or other of our lives. Lady Crotchett looked at him with a troubled expression on her honest face as she noticed his flushed, puffy cheeks and muddy eyes at the breakfast-table, while Sir Thomas hemmed significantly and uneasily at a sight the cause of which was too palpable to be explained away on the most far-fetched principle of ethics.

Dr. Tabernacle was too much occupied in attempting to ignore the philosophical blandishments of Mrs. St. Paul to pay attention to anything else, but Miss Walker, whose eyes were as sharp as a lynx's, was struck by the youth's appearance, and incurred his undying hatred by asking him point-blank across the table whether he did not find it unusually oppressive that morning—he looked so extremely warm.

As soon as the meal was over, Lady Marian suggested to Cynthia that she should join her and Blanche in sketching the back of the house from a certain spot in the grounds from which a remarkably pretty view of it could be obtained; and Cynthia, always ready to fall in with plans that gave her guests pleasure, consented. Blanche, it seemed, had really rather a taste for drawing, which Lady Marian was anxious should be developed; and no doubt, if we took the trouble to make the necessary investigations, we should find latent germs of the artistic instinct even in snails and tortoises—seeing that there is said to be no being upon the globe, however apparently stupid, without some unsuspected potentiality of mental life. Nora began to busy herself in sundry little household matters which need not concern us here; Sir Thomas plunged into an argument with the Squire that bade fair to occupy them both the entire forenoon, and Veryan, having nothing particular to do, lighted a cigarette and stood at the open door that led out into the garden.

"Oh, Miss Jorkaway, didn't you say you thought of walking down to the village this morning?" said the voice of Mrs. Cherryfield, as she came out of the dining-room with a bunch of keys in her hand.

"I did," replied the governess, who was just behind. "I was going to Debenham's about that trimming for Cynthia's dress. The colour doesn't match properly somehow, and I want to see if I can change it."

"Well, then, I wish you'd be good enough to pay these bills for me, will you?" said Mrs. Cherryfield, diving into her pocket and producing a fat purse. "There's three-and-ninepence owing to Mrs. Upcraft, and seven pounds something to Hunt the butcher, and—where can it be now, I wonder? Oh, here it is—this little account at Showell's. See, there's a ten-pound note. And then I want you to call at Ockelford's and tell him to send up a good handsome turbot in time for dinner to-night, with a couple of lobsters for sauce. You won't forget now, will you? I think that's all I want."

"I won't forget," answered Miss Jorkaway, stowing away the bills and money with which she had been entrusted. Mrs. Cherryfield forthwith disappeared into the study, and Miss Jorkaway, with a preoccupied expression, moved some steps forward in the direction of the staircase. Just then Veryan turned round, and their eyes met.

"Did I hear you say you were going for a walk?" he said civilly. "It's a lovely morning—I should

like to come with you, unless you prefer being alone."

Miss Jorkaway's heart gave a great bound of exultation. The chance for which she had so envied that stupid Hugh only the day before—a chance he had thrown away—was being repeated for her special benefit. Truly, she said to herself, the fates were very kind to her. And she knew so much more about him now than she had known yesterday, she occupied so greatly strengthened a position, that it was well, after all, that the opportunity had been postponed. Especially, too, was it acceptable to her, in view of Virtue's arrogant boast as she quitted her overnight. Virtue, indeed! What could Virtue do? And yet, this advance on the part of Veryan was so strange, so unlooked-for, a move, that it behoved her to be wary, very wary. More than ever must she be upon her guard. He *must* have some object in view in thus proposing so long an interview with her, particularly as he had never gone out of his way to show her the slightest attention before.

"I shall be delighted," she replied in her best society manner, suppressing the agitation that she felt.

"Then run up and put on your bonnet and tippet," said Veryan carelessly, "and let us start at once."

Miss Jorkaway, who did not wear bonnets and tippets, greatly resented this cavalier address; but

it was not her cue to take offence, so off she flounced, and in twenty minutes or so came creaking and rustling downstairs again, several large feathers swaying from side to side upon her hat, a reticule in her hand, and a pair of dangerously high-heeled boots encasing her substantial feet. She was a person of striking appearance, if not exactly beautiful, and the glance that Veryan cast at her as she approached him tugging on her gloves might easily have been mistaken for admiration.

The morning, as Veryan had said, was lovely. The sun was already hot, but there was a cool, soft breeze, dewdrops still sparkled on the rich grass under the shade of the chestnuts, and the air seemed full of that sweet, fresh scent that prevails when the day is young. The last time we saw two persons going to the village together it was the girl who was most in harmony with their surroundings. On this occasion it was the man. Veryan, with his brilliant natural exterior, and carelessly worn yet perfectly fitting attire, looked almost like part of the sunshine; whereas Miss Jorkaway, we are afraid, was not a very graceful creature, and her habit of holding up her skirts even on the driest days, coupled with a certain addictedness to stiff cloth jackets and a tendency to walk in a prancing way, as though she had spring soles, was irresistibly suggestive of Gower Street. Of course, she was unaware of this; and, to do her justice, there are many men at large who would have unhesitatingly described her as a

"monstrous fine woman," and as near an approach to Juno in skirts and whalebone as England could be expected to produce.

For some seconds she felt rather at a loss how to open the campaign. There was so much to find out, and the information she already possessed had been obtained by such very questionable methods, that it would require the most skilful diplomacy to turn it safely to account; besides, she had an uncomfortable suspicion that Veryan might have become aware of her intrigues (for there was evidently no relying on Hugh) and that this unusual move of his had been adopted with some definite intent. Veryan, meanwhile, looked perfectly unconscious and at his ease, and seemed to be thinking of nothing but the pleasure of the walk and the beauty of the summer fields.

"There's nothing I enjoy more than walking," said the lady at last, finding that Veryan did not speak. "Especially on a day like this. You are an enthusiastic walker, I believe?"

Veryan raised his eyebrows with an absent smile. "Oh, yes, I'm fond enough of walking," he replied, "given good roads, good weather, and a congenial comrade. Perhaps that's why I'm enjoying myself so much now."

"Heyday!" thought Miss Jorkaway, quite startled. "A personal compliment to lead off with—what's in the wind now, I should like to know?" Then, aloud—

"You find so many people congenial, Mr. Veryan. You must be a very happily constituted person. Did you have a pleasant stroll yesterday with Mr. Crotchett?"

"With Crotchett? Oh, certainly. We went over the fields to Graygoose Chase, and came back by the road past Turnover Hill. Delightful little bit of country in its way; you should go there next time you've nothing else to do."

"I shall make a point of it," replied Miss Jorkaway. "The Rector called while you were out, by the bye. You've never met Mr. Giles yet, have you?"

"No, never," said Veryan, stooping to pick a flower.

"He's rather a remarkable man," continued Miss Jorkaway, "and I think you'd be sure to like him. Quite the fine old country gentleman, you know. And an exceedingly keen politician. Do you take an interest in politics? Of course I'm only a woman, and know next to nothing about them; but the Rector interested us all most deeply, indeed Lady Crotchett felt very much alarmed, and so, I confess, did I. Miss Walker, of course, made game of the whole thing, which is just like her, but the impression left upon the rest of us was that affairs are very serious indeed."

"Really?" said Veryan. "What's the matter—some Bill going to be introduced by the O'Collar Don that the Rector doesn't agree with?"

"Bill!" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway with scorn. "No indeed; it's something very much more important than a Bill. It was like this. We were talking about that terrible discovery, you remember, that was made the other day——"

"What discovery?" asked Veryan. "Oh, you mean that haystack on fire over at——"

"Haystack on fire, indeed!" echoed Miss Jorkaway almost angrily. "Of course I mean nothing of the sort. I mean the attempted assassination of the Czar, that everybody's been talking about. Well, now——"

"Oh, that!" remarked Veryan in a depreciatory tone. "I thought you meant something serious. Czars always are assassinated, aren't they? It's part of the business, you know."

"Really, Mr. Veryan!" cried the lady, not quite knowing what to make of this chilling interpolation. "One would think you were accustomed to such horrors, by the way you speak of them. However, if *you* think of them so lightly, other people don't; and the Rector assured us yesterday that England was literally swarming with conspirators of one sort or another, all bent on overturning the Government and robbing and murdering everyone else. What they are called doesn't matter so very much—spies, or Anarchists, or Nihilists, they're all tarred with the same brush, and a dangerous lot they are. Of course I know nothing about them myself, I go simply by what the Rector said, and I tell you he made us

all exceedingly uncomfortable. Even Sir Thomas allowed that the situation was serious, and I saw that he felt more uneasy than he liked to own."

"What, Sir Thomas Crotchett?" said Veryan carelessly, lighting a cigarette. "I don't see what there is to be uneasy about. He's not an Anarchist or anything of that sort, is he?"

"Good heavens, Mr. Veryan, what can you be thinking about?" cried Miss Jorkaway. "Sir Thomas Crotchett an Anarchist? Of course not! Who ever dreamt of such a thing?"

"I thought you meant he was feeling uneasy lest he should be found out," returned Veryan with a laugh.

"I don't believe you hear the half that's said to you," exclaimed Miss Jorkaway resentfully. At the same moment it occurred to her that Veryan was simply acting a part, and that his absurd remarks were intended in self-defence. But whatever might be the truth, she was determined to push Veryan into a corner, and so judge for herself how far he was implicated in secret political intrigues. Not that she had any spite against him personally—far from it; her great object was to save Cynthia from marrying a suspicious character, and so to arouse his fears as to force him to disappear altogether from the scene, thus removing the danger in which she herself stood of being again cast upon the world. And, as we know, she had more than one string to her bow.

"Of course," she resumed, "Sir Thomas is beyond

suspicion. He is a baronet with a stake in the country, and is, moreover, devoted to scientific pursuits. But there are others who do not occupy such an enviable position. People who have no ostensible means of livelihood, and whose antecedents are entirely unknown, would naturally fall under suspicion first. And there are such people, you know—oh, one meets them everywhere, even in the very best society, and some of them actually go masquerading through the world under the disguise of an *alias*." Nothing like an open diplomacy, thought the governess, as she threw out this hint. "The Rector, indeed, said that we could never be sure of anybody."

"The Rector must lead a very uncomfortable life," remarked Veryan, as they turned into a broad green meadow.

"Forewarned is forearmed," retorted Miss Jorkaway, giving a defiant jerk to her sunshade. "It may be disagreeable to be always suspecting other people, but it would be worse, far worse, to find ourselves blown up in our beds some fine evening, let me tell you."

"Why?" asked Veryan, nonchalantly.

"Why!" echoed the governess. "Well, of all extraordinary questions——"

"My dear lady, we must all die some time or other," replied Veryan, "and for my part I would far sooner come to a sudden end without anticipating it than go through the tortures and apprehensions of

a prolonged illness. I don't at all sympathise with the prevailing horror of instantaneous death. You go to bed well and happy, you sink into a delightful sleep, and then there's an end of you. You never wake up again. You are blown into nothing without knowing it. What is there to dread in that? Would you prefer a fortnight of smallpox or typhoid fever to begin with, or a spell of peritonitis by way of preparation? Upon my word, I candidly can't agree with you."

"What! You defend assassination?" cried Miss Jorkaway.

"There's a prejudice against it, I know," admitted Veryan, "but remember that there's nothing for which something can't be said. I knew a murderer once—a most interesting person—who had killed seven men. We had lunch together. Of course I had sufficient delicacy not to bring up the subject——"

"A murderer!" gasped Miss Jorkaway. "And pray why wasn't he hanged?"

"Oh, he was only a political assassin, and so far respectable," exclaimed Veryan gravely. "And he was protected by some extradition treaty that didn't apply to his case. But I considered all that his own private affair; it didn't concern me, and it was not for me to allude to it."

A pause ensued, during which Miss Jorkaway tried to collect her thoughts. It seemed to her that Veryan was defying and eluding her in the same

breath. His very candour disarmed her. The man actually made no secret of his infamy. He was a friend of assassins, possibly an accomplice, if not an assassin himself. In spite of her astonishment and perplexity Miss Jorkaway could not repress a glow of satisfaction, of excitement, even of admiration. Veryan fully justified her suspicions. She had hit upon a mysterious personage at last.

"You must have been a great traveller," she said, starting on another tack. "Have you ever been in Russia?"

"Heaven forbid," answered Veryan briefly.

"Wouldn't trust his neck there, evidently," was Miss Jorkaway's mental comment. "Then you don't speak Russian, I suppose?"

"Not a word," said Veryan.

"That's a lie," thought the governess. "*I* know better than that.—Well, Russia must be a very uncomfortable country to live in," she went on. "What with all those horrible, ruthless Nihilists, and the feeling of insecurity that must pervade society——"

"I've always had considerable sympathy with Nihilists," remarked Veryan calmly.

"Oh, have you!" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway. "But that's only to be expected, after what you have just said. Do you know, Mr. Veryan, you are making yourself out to be an exceedingly dangerous person?"

"Dangerous to whom?" asked Veryan with a sidelong glance at her.

"Ah! That's the question," snapped the governess. "Such views may be all very well in Russia, where everyone lives in an atmosphere of suspicion——"

"Some people seem to live in an atmosphere of suspicion here," observed Veryan.

"We don't approve of assassination, anyhow," retorted Miss Jorkaway, "whether the victim is a Czar or anybody else."

"*I* believe in the principle that it is always expedient for one man to die for the people, so that the whole nation perish not," said Veryan more seriously. "But whether any good would be brought about by the particular measure you refer to is another matter altogether. By the way, talking of political intrigues, I'll tell you rather a funny story. I was staying once upon a time in a certain European capital, where the Minister of the Interior—what we should call the Home Secretary—was an old gentleman whom I will style Count X. One of the most prominent personages in society was a lady—let us say Madame *Z*—who was believed to be in the pay of a neighbouring Government. Now this lady was the Count's *bête noire*. His own hands were not, in an official sense, entirely clean, and he had very good reasons for supposing that Madame *Z* knew more about his secrets than was at all convenient; while she, on her side, was so seriously compromised—also in an official sense—that her personal safety was scarcely worth a week's purchase. In fact, she might have been arrested at almost any moment. The Count,

however, hesitated, for reasons best known to himself, to issue the warrant for her apprehension, and for months the two continued to watch each other like cat and mouse, the poor Count being often driven to his wits' end to find some way out of the *impasse.* At last the lady took the affair in both hands and put an end to it for good. Everybody said it was a stroke of genius on her part, and I have no doubt the Count thought so too. Can you guess what it was she did?"

"No! What?" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway, eagerly.

"*She married him,*" said Veryan, darting a glance at her.

"Married him?" echoed the lady.

"She married him," repeated Veryan. "And then they each knew all the other's secrets, and there were no more suspicions or conflict of interests between them. Ah, they made a great discovery, those two. The secret of a happy life is to marry your bitterest enemy. No greater mistake in the world than to unite yourself to a person you already love. Marry your enemy, and you change your mutual relations at once and for ever; you transform a foe into a friend, you reconcile interests that were once opposed, and you discover a thousand charming qualities which before were hidden from you by prejudice, misconception, and personal bias.—Allow me to offer you my hand!"

It was—only over a stile. But if there had been any doubt in her mind as to the hint Veryan in-

tended to convey to her by his story, all misgivings were dispelled by those concluding words, which, though capable of a *double entendre*, were too pointed to be a mere offer of assistance. The effect upon Miss Jorkaway was electrical. Her heart stood still for a couple of seconds, and then thumped furiously against her ribs. To marry Veryan—that fascinating, exasperating, beautiful, mysterious being — was a dream of happiness that had never crossed her wildest, her most impetuous fancy. Yet the proffer was unmistakable. He had divined that she hated him, and now took this most delicate and original way of proposing an alliance in two senses of the word. And the more she thought of it the more convinced she felt that they were made for one another. What were the schoolgirl fascinations of a chit like Cynthia in comparison with her maturer charms? After all, what man of taste and culture could hesitate between them for an instant?

Veryan was standing all this time on the other side of the stile, his hand still extended to assist her. Miss Jorkaway's agitation was great, and her nerve lost something of its firmness. With flushed face and blinking eye she succeeded in placing her foot on the top step—a rather high one—and slowly drawing up the other after it. At the same moment a sound of rending was heard, for in her confusion she had trodden on her alpaca dress; her foot got entangled in the hole, and, her balance being thus insecure, she was forced to jump before she intended

to. Poor Veryan got the worst of the skirmish. Had he been less firm and active, she would have borne him to the earth; as it was, she only came floundering down upon him with the full weight of herself and her appurtenances, clasped to his breast by two encircling arms, and her cheekbone—oh, the rapture of it—scraping the side of his upturned chin in the encounter!

"Oh, I hope I didn't hurt you, did I?" she gasped bashfully, as she began to recover her equilibrium.

"Not in the least," Veryan assured her, coughing slightly to suppress a laugh. "I'm afraid you've torn your dress."

"Oh, that's of *no* consequence," replied Miss Jorkaway. The change in her relations to Veryan was still so recent—scarcely thirty seconds old, in point of fact—that she might well be excused for appearing a trifle flustered. "I was so much taken up with what you were saying that I almost missed my footing. Oh, and I *do* understand you, now, *so* well. I never did before. That I confess with freedom. But now my eyes are opened. Indeed, we may say that we understand each other, may we not?"

"If you don't understand me now, you shall know all about me soon," said Veryan, meaningly. Miss Jorkaway's heart bounded past concealment; such words could not be misconceived. Then he went on. "What were we talking about? Oh—about

Nihilists and such-like. Well, now, if you want my candid opinion on the subject, I don't agree with your Rector at all. I should say he had a craze about the affair. There are lots of such people about. One man will tell you that the world is governed by Jesuits, for instance, who are at the bottom of everything. He assures you that they control all the journals, all the politics, all the finance in Europe. It is they who for their own purposes make or mar a statesman, ensure the failure or success of a prima donna, and determine the winner of the Derby. Does a Cabinet resign? It is the Jesuits who have intrigued against it. Does a Bank fail? It is the Jesuits who have brought it down. Does silver fall fifty per cent. in value, or a promising new fashion in muffs or bonnets mysteriously die out before it has well caught on? Be sure the Jesuits are at work. An explosion in St. Petersburg, a rise in the rate of discount, a plague of wasps in Somersetshire, a crisis in Timbuctoo—it doesn't matter what—everything, he will assure you, is decided on and brought about by the myrmidons of the Black Pope, whose power is universal, invisible, and supreme. And then another man will deny this,—the world's wirepullers, he will say, are not the Jesuits but the Jews; while a third cries out that we are all at the mercy of the Freemasons. People must amuse themselves somehow, I suppose, and so they imagine all this nonsense. And your Rector seems a man of the same kidney. I wouldn't believe a hundredth

part of such quidnunckery if I were you, Miss Jorkaway. You're worthy of better things."

"I will be guided by you implicitly," replied Miss Jorkaway in a low voice. "Tell me what to believe and what to do; you will find me like wax in your hands. Hitherto I have been all alone. I have had no guide, no adviser, no friend. How sweet it is to find someone in whom it is possible to trust!"

"Er—no doubt," assented Veryan hastily, a slight expression of amusement passing over his brow. "Ah, here's the village at last. That old inn looks wonderfully picturesque, peeping through the elms. It's a long time since I was in a place I liked as well as this. The country is positively charming about here. I don't wonder the Cherryfields are so devoted to it."

Their arrival at one of the shops where there was business to be transacted prevented Miss Jorkaway from replying. But she was far too much elated to regret the interruption of their colloquy. Never had she shown such graciousness in her demeanour to the tradespeople as on this eventful morning, for never had she been accompanied by so unique a *cavaliere servente*. She no longer cared very much whether Veryan were a conspirator, a cracksman, or anything else; whatever he might or might not be, he had broadly hinted at comradeship, at private understandings, at common interests, even at a closer relation still. Up till then, she reflected, she had regarded herself as a diplomatist and nothing more.

It had been reserved for Veryan to show her that she was a very great deal more—a passionate and ardent-hearted woman.

The commissions finished, they turned and walked briskly homewards. The gentleman was bland and courteous; the maiden frolicked and romped around him in rather a fearsome way, and put forth all her natural arts of fascination as only an ingenious woman can. Secure in the understanding which now, she felt, existed between herself and Veryan, she talked incessantly, favouring him with her opinion of each member of the Cherryfield household, including the servants; exercised her wit upon the guests then staying at the Hall, and rallied him on having made a conquest of Miss Walker. Veryan listened with amusement at first, but soon got rather bored.

"You are a keen critic of human nature," he observed with an ambiguous smile, as Miss Jorkaway paused for breath.

"Who could help it, with such material at hand?" retorted the governess archly. "What a comedy life is, to be sure! Only one wants a sense of the humorous to appreciate it. It was a sense of the humorous that saved the situation for me the first time we ever met. Do you remember? I shall never forget that morning. But you did behave curiously, didn't you now? Confess you behaved curiously—come!"

"I must have done so, if it struck you in that light," replied Veryan, laughing.

"However, you have improved since," acknowledged the lady with a rampant smile. "I didn't understand you then, you know; and everything depends on that. Perhaps it would be equally true to say that you didn't understand me either. Well, all that's at an end, isn't it? Ah, if one could only know beforehand——"

"Pardon me for interrupting you, but you seem to have something trailing behind—a sort of tag," said Veryan. "Can I——"

"A sort of what?" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway, trying to get a view of it over her shoulder. "Oh, it's nothing of any consequence I dare say—only a——"

"Permit me," interposed Veryan, stooping down. But, most unluckily, he happened to tread upon it at the very moment that Miss Jorkaway took a smart stride forward, and the consequence was that something hidden suddenly gave way, and the situation became embarrassing. Miss Jorkaway made a sort of dive downwards to prevent a further catastrophe, and seemed to be hanging on desperately to something white that threatened to part company from her person altogether; while Veryan, debarred from assisting her by the very nature of the case, waited in mute bewilderment, entirely at a loss to divine how the lady would extricate herself from the predicament in which she stood.

"There's no help for it," she said hastily. "I must fly. I am so sorry to desert you; don't

attempt to come with me on any account. I'll take a short cut through the fields, and get home in no time;" and before he could reply she had executed a quick flank movement, leaving him alone upon the road. Veryan, we need scarcely say, neither attempted nor longed to follow her; in fact, he seemed rather relieved at her disappearance, though regretting the untowardness of the accident. Miss Jorkaway meanwhile scudded as fast as her feet would carry her along the other side of the hedge, and arrived at the Hall without further mishap a considerable time before the appearance of her swain; a fact which was not without its influence on what she called the "situation"—leading, as it did, to a development of events that had an important bearing on her interests.

* * * * *

"Well, Mr. Hugh, and what have *you* been doing with yourself all the morning?" said Miss Jorkaway, half an hour later, as she emerged from her bedroom after repairing damages. The two met on the garden steps, where Hugh was smoking moodily.

"Nothing," replied the youth. "I've been feeling like a boiled owl all day. Something must have disagreed with me overnight. Been out for a walk?"

"Yes; I've been down to the village with Mr. Veryan," was Miss Jorkaway's complacent answer. "The weather is delicious, and we had a most charming time."

"With Veryan, eh?" exclaimed Hugh, opening

his eyes. "Oh, I see. You think I missed my opportunity yesterday, so you've gone in for pumping him yourself! Good for you. Well, what did you screw out of him?"

"Screw out of him!" repeated the governess with dignity. "I must say, Mr. Crotchett, that you have a very singular way of expressing yourself. Mr. Veryan is a gentleman whom very few persons are capable of understanding at first. It requires a certain instinct, a sort of delicate intellectual sympathy, to probe the recesses of his nature. He puzzled me, I confess, for some time; but now——"

"What, you don't mean to say you've been going on the wrong tack?" interrupted Hugh, removing his pipe in astonishment.

"That there's a mystery about Mr. Veryan," resumed Miss Jorkaway in measured tones, "goes without saying; *that* I have always known. But he is one of the most remarkable men I have ever met. Of course he's misunderstood. Men of his intellect always are misunderstood—because they're head and shoulders above everybody else. The vulgar distinctions between right and wrong, as they appear to the common herd, vanish in the light of genius. Such things are relative merely. If you were capable of understanding a man like Mr. Veryan——"

"Ho, ho, ho! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" roared Hugh, throwing back his head. "By Jove, that's the very finest thing I've heard for ages! I was a fool, was I, because he got round me so easily? I lost my

opportunity, did I, and let him twist me round his little finger? Splendid! So you made *your* opportunity, and now he's got round *you!* Well, if I'm a fool, at any rate I'm a fool in very clever company O lord, O lord, to think he's done you too!"

"Mr. Crotchett, I consider your remarks most abominably offensive," cried Miss Jorkaway, turning crimson with anger and mortification. "You're talking of what you know nothing whatever about You think I've been outwitted, do you? Well, we shall see. Let those laugh who win, is my motto. However, there's no need for us to quarrel, in spite of your extraordinary behaviour. On the contrary, I want to be good friends with you. Believe me, I shall always wish you well—always. And I hope most fervently that you may prosper in everything on which you have set your heart. Why do you let the grass grow under your feet, Mr. Crotchett? Why don't you go in and win?"

"Win what?" asked Hugh, puzzled at the sudden change of the governess's tone from rage to friendliness.

"Win what, indeed!" Miss Jorkaway mimicked him. "Oh, nothing—nothing at all. I did think once that you were very much in earnest about—a certain person; but I see I was mistaken. Even cherries don't drop into one's mouth of their own accord; one has to put up one's hand and pick them. If *that* is too much trouble——"

"There's someone else in the running," muttered Hugh gruffly, turning a deep red.

"*Don't you believe it,* Mr. Hugh," said the governess mysteriously. "I'm not in a position to say more; but I don't *think* you've any cause to fear a rival. Ah, we shall see curious things, some of these fine days."

The noise of approaching footsteps prevented Hugh from replying. Miss Jorkaway caught her breath, and looked round in consternation lest she should have been overheard. Sir Thomas Crotchett, accompanied by Mrs. Cherryfield and Nora, was crossing the hall, and coming in their direction. He had that morning's county newspaper in his hand.

"Ahem." Hugh looked up at the familiar sound. "I have come to tell you, Hugh, that I am compelled to take a temporary and most reluctant leave of our kind host and hostess," said Sir Thomas, "on very unexpected business. In fact, I shall have to start immediately after luncheon, and Lady Crotchett will come with me."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Hugh, rising. "Nothing unpleasant, I hope?"

"Nothing," replied Sir Thomas, "which need bring unpleasantness to you." Miss Jorkaway thought the expression somewhat odd; and then she noticed that Sir Thomas looked pale, and that he commanded his voice with an effort. "I trust to return within a week—it may be even sooner. You will, of course, remain."

"Don't you want me to come with you? Can't I be of any service?" asked Hugh, whose loyalty to

his guardian was one of the most pleasing features of his character.

"No, my boy, certainly not," said Sir Thomas with prompt decisiveness. "Stay and make the best of your time here. Luncheon will be in half an hour, and I shall see you again then. I must now go and make my necessary preparations."

"Are you going to London?" asked Hugh, as Sir Thomas moved away.

"I am going into Monmouthshire," replied the baronet.

"Isn't it a pity? I am so sorry," said Nora. "I hope they won't be absent very long."

"Oh no, my dear, I'm sure they won't," said Mrs. Cherryfield. "We shall soon have them back again, no doubt. Have you told Williams to order the carriage?"

"I wonder what's up now," said Hugh reflectively.

"Sir Thomas evidently doesn't wish to speak of it just yet, whatever it is," remarked Nora. "He hasn't even told us; but I believe it was something he saw in the paper. However, we'll hope it's nothing serious. I'll go, now, and see about the carriage."

"And I'll tell cook to hurry luncheon," added Mrs. Cherryfield. "I fancy everybody's in the house."

"Mr. Veryan isn't back yet," said Nora as she disappeared.

"He won't be long," remarked the governess.

Then she left Hugh and walked down one of the garden paths. Here was another mystery. Monmouthshire! Where had she heard of Monmouthshire during the last week or two? The name was curiously familiar to her, and she racked her brains to recall the association. A glance at the paper would no doubt have given the required clue, but she had noticed that Sir Thomas Crotchett kept it tightly folded in his hand, and that he carefully took it upstairs with him as though to prevent its being seen by anyone. At last her memory awoke. It was Veryan who had mentioned Monmouthshire. It was in Monmouthshire that Camelot Towers stood —the seat of old Lord Llwydiarth—the house where Veryan had been staying, and where the great jewel-robbery had taken place.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ENAMELLED STUD.

"KEZIA POTTLEBERRY, keep your mouth shut and get on wi' your work. There's plenty for ye to do without tattlin' about things as don't belong to ye. Where's them handkerchers as you was to have 'ad ready by this mornin'?"

"Well, I'm sure, Mrs. Sexton!" retorted Kezia with a toss of her head. "I don't know who give you the say o' *me*. Seems to me *I* ain't the only person in this kitchen as meddles where she's got no business to. What's wrong now, I'd like to know? I've got eyes an' ears as well as other folk, and a tongue too, if it comes to that. On'y this mornin', Mr. Crotchett he says to me, says he——"

"Hold your scandalous tongue!" cried Virtue. "What call 'as a common hussy like you to throw yourself in a young gentleman's way? If Miss Cynthia was to hear you talk, out you'd pack at a moment's notice. Come, hurry up, an' don't sit idlin' there. Go and finish your bedrooms, and then bring me them handkerchers. You've been dilly-

dallyin' over 'em for more 'n a week, and the mistress 'as asked for 'em three times. If I 'ad my way wi' ye——"

"I wish you'd both get out o' my kitchen, wi' your wrangling," interrupted Cook Bullimore, bustling to and fro. "I must say, Virtue Sexton, as you makes yourself mighty free. S'pose the girl do love a bit o' gossip, where's the harm? Come, Kezia, better get to your work. I can't 'ave you clutterin' up here. I wants all the room to myself."

"Oh, I'm off," replied Kezia. "Miss Cynthia, indeed! Anybody with 'alf an eye can see where *she's* lookin'. What does she care about Mr. Crotchett, or Mr. Crotchett about 'er? It's the light-coloured gentleman as she fancies—and I don't blame 'er, not I. A pretty couple they'd make, too. But, my goodness me, who's that?"

Cook Bullimore's eyes followed Kezia's. "Miss Jorkaway a-prancing down the avenue wi' Mr. Veryan, eh?" commented the cook, pausing in her operations to peer sideways out of the window. "Ah, she's a busybody, if you like; but I don't think she'll catch *him* in a 'urry, with all her goings-on. Lor, it's as good as a play to watch 'er, I declare. She's like one o' them ferrets, as must 'ave its nose in everything."

The announcement that Miss Jorkaway and Mr. Veryan had gone out together—for the above conversation was taking place on the morning of their eventful journey to the village—had a strange effect

on Virtue. She looked after them too, as though to satisfy herself of the truth of the cook's report; and then, without troubling herself further about Kezia, stepped quickly and decisively upstairs. As she passed the garden door she saw Hugh strolling in his usual listless style towards the shrubberies, pipe in mouth. "There's a surprise in store for you, my bonny man," she muttered to herself. "The old folk shall dream dreams, and then the young ones shall see visions as they never dreamt of. The governess-woman gone out wi' the man as calls 'imself Veryan; ah! Well, they're all as clay in the hands o' the potter; they scheme and they plan and they think they're follerin' their own devices, and not one of 'em knows o' the invisible hand that's movin' 'em this way and that, like so many pawns upon the chessboard."

Arrived at the upper landing, Virtue Sexton went straight into Veryan's room. It was still in the disordered state in which he had left it on rising, thanks to the idleness and love of chatter which distinguished the girl Kezia. But Virtue paid no attention to what under other circumstances she would have made the text of a denunciation. Without looking to the right or to the left she walked immediately up to the table, and took up one book after another. It was not long before she laid hands upon the mysterious volume that had so captivated the imagination of Miss Jorkaway. The fact of its being printed in so strange a type was sufficient to identify

it at once. Virtue turned to the title-page and read the name that was there written. "A. C. Thwaites." Nothing could be plainer than those words. So far Miss Jorkaway's assertion was correct.

"The Lord hath delivered him into my hands," uttered the old woman with a stern glitter in her eyes as she left the room. "The man of evil purposes and evil deeds shall no longer go unpunished. I'll tear the mask from 'is face in the sight of every man and woman in this house. For nigh on twenty year the Lord's vengeance 'as been lyin' in wait for 'im, and the appointed hour's at hand. The Lord never 'urries, neither; He always takes 'is time. But 'is time comes, and comes when they least expect it."

She went through the passages till she came to the bedroom of Hugh Crotchett. That, too, was in disorder, and she began to put it to rights in her slow, methodical way. First she made the bed; then she fell to brushing the scattered clothes, and folded them up neatly one by one. "They think the boy's a fool," she muttered to herself, "but there's folly as is better nor wisdom. The wisdom o' the world is foolishness to God. The governess-woman thinks she's wise, and she called me an old fool, or something like it. Wise in 'er own conceit, that's what it is. What does *she* want, I'd like to know, a-meddlin' wi' matters as don't concern 'er? An' yet she's been an instrument so far. It was 'er pryin' as found out the name in that man's book."

Here she sat down on the edge of the bed, and looked around her. "The lad's well off, anyhow. That old Sir Thomas an' his lady 'ave done kindly by 'im, no one can deny that. But where did they pick 'im up? A distant relative, says they. There's something behind that, too."

She stood up, duster in hand, and began to rub the furniture. Hugh's dressing-table was littered with a queer variety of miscellaneous articles, and she carefully put them straight. As she did so, her eyes fell upon his dressing-case, a particularly handsome and well-fitted specimen that had been given to him by Lady Crotchett on his last birthday. Virtue had of course often seen it before, but it had generally been locked. To-day it was open, and she was tempted to inspect it more closely. It certainly was a beautiful dressing-case, and seemed to have been well cared for. The scent-bottles were all silver-topped; the soap-box shone brilliantly, the brushes were backed with ivory, and there were little instruments for what is now called manicuring which, judging from the condition of the owner's hands, had been kept for ornament rather than for use. At the bottom there were a couple of drawers; not "secret" drawers, opening by some hidden and undiscoverable spring, but still somewhat unobtrusively placed, so that a careless observer might easily have passed them over. On this occasion Virtue noticed them, and a slight pull disclosed the fact that they were unlocked. She opened the first, and

found it empty. She opened the second—and turned white to the very lips.

And yet there seemed nothing startling, nothing extraordinary, in the object it contained. A cheap, common-looking solitaire stud for a man's wristband lay innocently upon the white satin lining under Virtue's awe-struck eyes; a stud made apparently of gilded brass, and enamelled in dark blue on the outside, with a monogram in the middle. The woman's heart ceased beating for a moment as she clutched it. She turned it over and over, and examined the monogram intently; she puckered her brow and clenched her teeth, trembling violently from head to foot. For five long minutes she stood there, gazing in dumb and helpless stupefaction at the bit of brass before her. To her it was evidently something more than an antiquated and almost worthless trinket. It was a link with the past, a witness to unexpiated crime, the key of a mystery up till then insoluble, a weapon of retribution, a messenger from Heaven itself.

What, after all, is accident? To us it appears the natural result, unconsciously brought about, of a fortuitous concourse of events, just as matter may be regarded as the agglomeration of molecules or units colliding fortuitously in space. Yet matter is not the ultimate expression of existence. Behind the phenomenon we call matter there is the noumenon we call substance, the eternal "reality" which gives to matter its extension and colour and form

and weight, the "reality" of which matter is the embodiment and projection only. And may not the overt and palpable succession of events that we call chance have its hidden underlying noumenon as well; may it not be that there is a something which eludes our subtlest perceptions, a force not material but mental, an aura of unseen and unsuspected influences guiding, shaping, regulating the trivial incidents of life with a view to those combinations which make the destinies of men? The old Calvinistic woman, standing face to face with the chance discovery that had just burst upon her, had something of this thought in her mind, although she expressed it in a simpler, cruder form. Not a shade of doubt disturbed her firm belief that "the Lord" was ordering everything, with a view to the punishment of guilt and the eternal confusion of the ill-doer. The name in the book and the initials which formed the monogram *agreed.* And the book was Veryan's and the monogram was in the possession of Hugh Crotchett. What mysterious cord of destiny was it that united these two men? Instinctively she cast a glance toward the garden, where Hugh was slouching over his pipe and reading a bright pink newspaper. The glimpse she caught of him seemed to rouse her from her reverie. Something almost like a smile stole over her hard, grim face. Then she replaced the stud where she had found it, carefully closed both drawers, and went upstairs to her own room.

She sat down in an old rocking-chair and rocked

herself restlessly to and fro for nearly an hour. Her thoughts roamed over the past, and busied themselves with those great problems of sin and fate and retribution which have occupied the minds of some of the deepest thinkers in the world all down the centuries—the sages of India, the philosopher-poets of Greece, the author of the Book of Job. And there were points of contact between her own simple generalizations and theirs, though the avenging furies of Euripides were only recognised by her under a widely different nomenclature. The remembrance of Cynthia, the one dear apple of her eye, then came swiftly over her. The danger-cloud had surely passed away, for she held the lightning-conductor that would avert the impending flash; but there was pain and suffering to be undergone, and that no one could avert. She knew that the child's affections were engaged where they could never be permitted to flourish and bear sweet fruit. She longed and prayed that they might be turned into a more promising and natural channel, and that the boorish youth towards whom she had herself felt so magnetic and unaccountable an attraction might acquire something of that acceptability in Cynthia's eyes. True, the change would need a miracle for its production; but what was a miracle to God?

At last she roused herself, and took her way downstairs. Miss Jorkaway had already returned, and was at that moment talking to Hugh upon the garden steps. A few minutes later she heard from

the cook that Mrs. Cherryfield had ordered luncheon to be served a little earlier than usual, as Sir Thomas and Lady Crotchett had to leave unexpectedly for a few days upon important business. She pricked her ears at that, but was satisfied as soon as it transpired that Hugh was to stay behind. Soon afterwards Veryan came strolling home up the avenue. Cynthia, flitting hither and thither in the sunshine, went to meet him, and the two walked on together, taking a path which led to the garden at the back of the house and apparently engrossed in each other's company. Certainly they looked a well-matched, handsome pair as they wandered over the sun-lit lawns and beside the blazing flowerbeds. Never had Veryan's laugh been gayer or Cynthia's smile more sweet. Never had the world seemed brighter or more beautiful than it did to both of them that noontide. It was not until they heard footsteps approaching through the shrubberies that they moved apart and remembered that the world did not belong to them exclusively. Indeed, Miss Jorkaway was there to remind them of it.

"So you've got back," said that astúte lady as they met. There was nothing in the demure looks of either to arouse her jealousy, and she felt exceedingly complacent. "Have you heard the news?"

"No, I've only just returned," said Veryan. "What is it?"

"I've heard nothing either," put in Cynthia. "Has anything happened that I don't know?"

"Sir Thomas and Lady Crotchett are suddenly

called away," replied Miss Jorkaway succinctly. "They leave immediately after lunch. For a few days only, I believe. And the business in hand is a secret," she added, darting a glance at Veryan.

"Which means, I suppose, that it's nobody's business but their own," remarked Veryan carelessly.

Miss Jorkaway looked significant and dubious; while Cynthia said,—

"I'm very sorry to hear it. I'm awfully fond of Lady Crotchett, and Sir Thomas is a dear old featherbed. Where are they going?"

"They're going into Monmouthshire," answered Miss Jorkaway with quiet emphasis.

"I suppose they have friends there," said Veryan, with a perfect show of unconcern. Miss Jorkaway thought his self-control most admirable.

"Monmouthshire? Why, that's where your friend Lord Llwydiarth lives," observed Cynthia innocently.

Veryan looked at Miss Jorkaway with an inscrutable smile that enchanted her. It spoke volumes; it embodied the "understanding" that he had established between them, it seemed to say, "Thanks for the warning, but I am well prepared." Oh, what a man he was! Burglar, conspirator, adventurer, assassin—what did it matter now? He had made her his confidante, and she had made him her hero.

"It would be great fun if Sir Thomas and his lordship should ever meet," he said with a light laugh. The luncheon-bell was heard in the distance at that moment, and they all went in together.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHAT HAPPENED OUT OF DOORS.

THERE was a little subdued hum of excitement, as the guests took their seats at table, on hearing of the temporary departure of Sir Thomas and Lady Crotchett, and a little polite curiosity as to the nature of their sudden business. Neither the baronet nor his wife, however, dropped a single word of enlightenment upon the subject, but confined themselves to expressing a hope that they would return within three days. Nothing more was said, and the conversation turned to other topics. Mrs. St. Paul discoursed in confidential tones to Dr. Tabernacle, her thesis being (as far as a sentence occasionally overheard could indicate it) the rapidly advancing physical degeneracy of the race; heralding the approach of a time when the human being would have no hair, no beard, no nails, and no teeth, but such an abnormal development of the cerebrum that the curve of his spine would be increased until his figure resembled a bent bow. Miss Walker devoted her attention exclusively to lobster mayon-

naise, on the plea that she had a headache and was not up to talking; the Squire made an occasional remark to Lady Marian (who was on his right) which showed that he was fully as absent as usual; while Veryan, Cynthia, and Nora chatted with unflagging vivacity. We have not heard much of Nora during the progress of this story, but she was an important person in the household nevertheless. She attached herself to no one, yet was admired and esteemed by all; a sure sign, as Miss Walker once observed, that she was destined like herself to die a maid.

Then came the inevitable bustle when the carriage was announced and adieux were said; though to be sure, as Mrs. Cherryfield remarked, it was only "au revoir." The Crotchetts once away, the other guests dispersed in different directions. Lady Marian went upstairs for a nap, and Miss Walker, vowing that (owing no doubt to the heat) she was only a poor dear that afternoon, followed her example. Miss Jorkaway watched her opportunity and seized it. Seeing Hugh with no especial purpose in his mind, and ardently desiring to effect a diversion which Veryan's guarded hint now justified her in attempting, she tapped him familiarly upon the arm, and volunteered to bear him company while he smoked his pipe. Hugh, with an indifferent air, said that she could do so if she pleased, and the governess accordingly followed him into the garden, where they took their seats upon a couple of chairs under the shadow of a spreading cedar-tree.

"Now I'm going to speak to you very seriously," said Miss Jorkaway, opening the campaign. "I'm not one to beat about the bush, as you know very well; and plain speech has always been my rule. Why don't you propose to Cynthia?"

Hugh coloured and looked sheepish. "I should think you could see how the land lies," he answered moodily. "There's another fellow in the field."

"There's *not* another fellow in the field," retorted Miss Jorkaway in a significant tone. "I'll be entirely frank with you. *I* thought there was, once. In fact, I was convinced of it; I never doubted it for a moment. But I live and learn; I'm not ashamed to own myself mistaken when I turn out wrong, and I now see things in quite a different light. You don't understand Mr. Veryan, and *I do*. He's a man who can't help making himself agreeable to everybody. He talks, and everybody listens. He smiles, and everybody is enchanted. He plays, and everybody is carried away with admiration. He doesn't intend anything, bless you; it all comes natural to him. Of course it's a dangerous gift, because it may lead to misconceptions; it has in your case, with regard to Cynthia. When he smiles, he can't help his smile being fascinating; but when everybody is fascinated alike, where's the ground for suspicion? He makes himself agreeable to Cynthia, just as he does to Mrs. St. Paul and everybody else; but you don't suppose he wants to marry Mrs. St. Paul or that he's in love with Miss Amelia Walker,

do you? No, believe me, all that means nothing. Charming as Cynthia is, she's not the girl to enslave a man like Veryan. When he marries he will choose a woman of the world, a woman who can enter into his own experiences and views and aims. Besides, the Squire would never allow it, I am sure. After all, no one knows who or what Mr. Veryan is, and it's one thing to welcome a man to your house and a vastly different thing to accept him offhand as your son-in-law. Whereas you—well, you have a position in the world; you're the ward of a British baronet!"

"H'm!" Hugh grunted between his puffs. "Yes, that's all very well, as you put it; you put it all right enough. But there's another side to the question. What about Cynthia? I thought she liked me, once; I did indeed. But I'm not so sure about that now. If she does, she don't go out of her way to show it, anyhow."

"How little you know women!" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway with a superior smile. "My dear Mr. Hugh, a woman is a very curious being. We women, you know, don't wear our hearts upon our sleeves. We delight in torturing the men who love us. It's a strange instinct, but it's true for all that. Every woman has a hidden, sneaking fondness for the man who loves her, and when she tortures him she really tortures herself too. She will commit the most astounding acts of cruelty for the mere pleasure of seeing the man suffer, while the whole time she is suffering as acutely as the man himself. She knows,

perhaps, that the man is dying to have her, and she is dying to have him too; and yet she'll refuse him over and over again, and avoid him, and drive him to all sorts of desperate actions out of pure delight in perversity. So you needn't despair, I tell you. Go to Cynthia without delay—now, while Sir Thomas is in Monmouthshire—and insist upon her marrying you. There's nothing a woman enjoys so much as being taken by storm. Make her feel that you're her master. Convince her from the outset that it's you that are her fate, and not another man. You can't judge of Cynthia's feelings for you by what she says or does. Mr. Veryan has not proposed, and I tell you that he *will not* propose—of that I feel absolutely sure; so you've a fair field in front of you. Strike while the iron's hot, and by the time Sir Thomas comes back the whole thing may be settled."

"But I don't want to be refused over and over again, and tortured, and played the fool with," said Hugh. "If girls are so perverse as all that, the less one has to do with 'em the better, it seems to me."

"Ah, but that's only at first," Miss Jorkaway made reply. "Once engaged, there's probably no more fear. We women, you know, don't like being caught; we hover and flutter about, and beat our little wings, and delight in avoiding the snare; but when once we *are* caught, we hug our chains—we wouldn't be free again for all the world can offer. That's the way with us," said the governess with a

gentle sigh. "We fight for our freedom while we have it, but when we lose it the universe itself becomes as nothing in comparison with the sweet slavery of love."

"You must have had no end of experience," said Hugh with an admiring glance at the fair orator, "and by Jove I don't wonder at it."

"Foolish person," cooed Miss Jorkaway, patting his hand benignly. "There was a time, perhaps——"

"Oh come, that's all rot," interrupted Hugh; meaning, of course, that Miss Jorkaway's time for being wooed was by no means a thing of the past. "Well, look here; I'll do it. The very first opportunity I get I'll ask Cynthia to have me. I say—I suppose you couldn't manage to be hanging about there too?"

"I? What, while you are proposing?" cried Miss Jorkaway, opening her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Why, to prompt me—back me up, you know," explained Hugh. "I haven't the gift o' the gab as you have. Ten to one I shall make a mess of it if I'm all alone. Besides——"

"My dear Mr. Hugh, you must be mad," exclaimed the governess, laughing. "Such a thing was never heard of. No, that would never do. Come, let us go indoors. I have one or two little matters to attend to upstairs, and I think Cynthia's in the conservatory." Hugh looked horribly frightened at this suggestion. "Oh, I don't mean that you are to go

straight up to her and do it without warning," Miss Jorkaway hastened to add. "But just go in and talk to her, and manage to convey a hint or two of your feelings, you know. Of course one must be diplomatic," she said as they began to move slowly towards the house. "Too much haste might be as fatal to your chances as too little. There, good-bye for the present. Mind you are able to give me a good report later on;" and off she whisked, warbling "Tra-la-la," while Hugh, feeling more thoroughly uncomfortable than ever in his life before, followed with hesitating steps.

But Cynthia was not in the conservatory. She was at that moment sitting on the bank of the little stream at the further end of the park, and Veryan was beside her. The exquisite morning had matured into a still, warm, golden afternoon. The blue water flowed past with a pleasant lapping sound more soothing than silence itself; a gentle breeze ever and anon rustled the leaves above, and the sunlight falling through them, dappled the mosslike turf. There are a few, a very few, moments in life when one feels in perfect harmony with one's environments; when the Nature without seems a reflection of the Nature within, and one finds one's own sensations responded to and reproduced by the objective world. It may be a question of nerves—a mere phase of subjectivity. But Veryan and Cynthia were not analytically disposed just then. Indeed I do not think they cared a rap either way. They both felt

that everything was exactly as they wanted it; no idea that any improvement was possible ever entered their heads; their "acquiescence in that which was" (as Mrs. St. Paul would have put it) was profound.

Just then Veryan laughed a little. "It was here," he said, "that I first met Miss Jorkaway."

"Was it? On this very spot?" asked Cynthia.

"On this very spot," answered Veryan. "She was sitting exactly where we are now, and I was over there. She told me to be off, and I wouldn't go. I was very comfortable, and I didn't see why I should. Then she got angry, and I chucked her an apple to appease her. At last she told me she believed I was mad, and threatened to send for the police; but she kept the apple all the same."

"It was very wicked of you," said Cynthia, toying with the grass.

"I dare say," responded Veryan. "I suppose the devil entered into me, as it will sometimes. But I think she has forgiven me now."

"By the way, you took her out for a walk this morning," remarked Cynthia, glancing at him.

"I accompanied her on a walk," corrected Veryan.

"Was she amusing?" asked Cynthia.

"Amusing is no word for it," said Veryan with a slow smile. "I chaffed her prettily *en revanche*. She seemed mystified at first, and then became confidential — fearsomely and dreadfully confidential. Then I helped her over a stile, and she nearly

knocked me over in return. Coming back she frisked around me like a two-year-old, when suddenly something mysterious occurred, and she flew away as though she had been shot."

"Oh, I know—her petticoat came down," replied Cynthia, laughing. "She told me about it just as we were going in to lunch. Poor Miss Jorkaway! It's a shame to laugh at her, after all."

"It's a shame to do anything *but* laugh and be happy in this weather," said Veryan, tossing back his hair. "What is Miss Jorkaway to us, as long as we have the sun and the grass and the flowers? People often sigh for happiness while all the time it is lying at their very finger-tips, and grow old while the things which make for eternal youth surround them on every side. It's very foolish; it's like starving in the midst of plenty. Here am I, and there are you; we've neither of us anything in the wide world to make us sad, and everything to make us happy; then why, in the name of common-sense, shouldn't we take advantage of it?"

"I never met anyone quite like you before," observed Cynthia shyly. "You seem as though you were destined to be always happy and always young. What is your secret? Have you found the elixir of life?"

"How can anybody tell that?" said Veryan mischievously. "Why, by its very nature, the elixir of life can never be proved as such, for that would imply that the man has escaped death for good and all, and

who can peer into futurity? All he can say is that he hasn't died so far; he can't possibly be sure that he never will. But I think I've discovered one thing. I *have* found out how to prolong my youth."

"Really! And what is the prescription?" asked Cynthia, laughing.

"Oh, its ingredients are simple enough," replied Veryan. "First, the largest possible amount of sunshine that can be procured; second, an abundance of fresh, pure air; third, the freest use of both, combined with outdoor exercise. All that is commonplace enough. Well, that is one part. Then——"

"Why, that's what the Rector always says," interrupted Cynthia.

"Does he? Then I shall take an early opportunity of making his acquaintance," said Veryan. "He's evidently a most sensible man. Then comes the mental part of it. No worry! Never let a disagreeable subject remain in your thoughts for an instant. If one arises, just put it aside, and think about something else. Of course this requires a certain effort at first, but a little training will soon make it a part of your nature, and all difficulty will disappear. Let your motto in life be *Never mind;* always rise superior to your surroundings if by any chance they are not what you would have chosen for yourself. Lastly——"

"Stop, stop!" cried Cynthia. "This is all very well, but it's impracticable. It reminds me of the Chinese remedy for consumption, or toothache, or

something, that I was reading about the other day. I wonder whether I can remember it. Let me see. It was composed of—of—oh, I know now—of frankincense, aloes, myrrh, saffron, and something else mixed with dew, hoarfrost, and snowflakes; then, after being exposed to the sun for a month it had to be bottled, and buried under the root of some flower that scarcely ever grows, and kept there for a century to ferment—by which time both the patient and his toothache would most probably have disappeared. Now what's the use of a remedy hedged about with impossible conditions? In the same way, it's all very well to say, Live in the sunshine, but what are you to do when the sun scarcely shines at all for months?"

"Go where it does shine," answered Veryan. "Follow it."

"Is that what you do?" queried Cynthia.

"Yes," he replied. "When I was five-and-twenty I went to the Land of Sunshine, and stayed there for several years. I lived in a low, broad house open to the sun on every side, situated on the summit of a wooded bluff overlooking a stretch of exquisite country called the Plains of Heaven. In front of me was a view of purple sea, breaking in white foam upon the rocks that bordered it; around me, a landscape of green fields and hills, with one high silvery peak in the distance, and groves which in the brilliant autumn weather were a mass of gorgeous hues—yellow, crimson, orange, and bronze;

above, a sky of blue crystal, and a sun which seemed to penetrate every pore of the body, infusing fresh vitality with each ray. There I read, and scribbled, and moralised, and played the violin, my whole life being one of pure sensuous rapture derived from things that are the common property of all. It seemed to me that it would be impossible to die in such a place; and I have never grown older since."

"And where is this paradise?" asked Cynthia with open eyes.

"It is called Japan," he answered, smiling. "But this is a digression. There is something else. It is necessary to cultivate a sort of sixth sense—the sense that reveals to us that which underlies external forms. It is untrue to say that beauty is only skin-deep. The real beauty lies much deeper. Anybody can admire pretty things; few have cultivated the faculty of recognising the beauty that exists under a surface which is itself unbeautiful. One wants the gift of something akin to second sight for that."

"Tell me more about it," said Cynthia, looking shyly up at him.

"I'll give you an illustration," replied Veryan; "a sort of analogy, you know. Look at that brick over there, just on that shelving bit of ground. An uninstructed eye sees in it nothing but an agglomeration of reddish-gray dust. Who would imagine that it contained well-nigh a pound weight of aluminium, one of the most beautiful and useful metals in existence? Well, that is a parable of what I mean

Let us once learn to see things as they are, and not only as they appear, and a new world of wonder and delight will immediately burst upon us. Or suppose we vary the metaphor. Instead of a brick, let us say—a girl. Now to the ordinary observer——"

"A girl instead of a brick! Thank you for the compliment," exclaimed Cynthia, laughing merrily.

"To the ordinary person, to ninety-nine persons out of a hundred," pursued Veryan, "the girl in question may be just a girl and nothing more. Plain or pretty, dull or bright, frivolous or earnest, it matters not—she is simply a girl among girls. But to the hundredth she is a vast deal more. She is the one woman under heaven to be loved. She is the one woman who imparts to him that subtle, mysterious, divine thrill which proclaims the monopoly that each has in the other, which is the physical manifestation of the spiritual passion called love, and the surest sign of the elective affinity between them. The world is full of these affinities and their corresponding repulsions. Have you never heard of people who can always tell as soon as a cat enters a room, although they cannot see it? That is a natural repulsion; the converse of the affinity I am speaking of. Now do you grasp my meaning?"

Cynthia was sitting with her hands clasped round her knees, gazing abstractedly in front of her. "I—I think I do," she answered in a low voice.

"And are you not a living witness to its truth?" he uttered with his eyes upon her.

"Oh, don't!" she cried, startled at his suddenness.

He took possession of her hand. "Is the revelation too abrupt for you?" he said softly. There was a pause. "Cynthia, you know as well as I do that we belong to one another."

Her heart was beating fast now, and she tried unsuccessfully to speak.

"And you've known it all along," he continued, "even if you were scarcely conscious of it yourself. We've been wanting each other all our lives, and at last we've come together."

She turned her head away as though trying to escape, while a bright tear trembled on her eyelash.

"Dear," said Veryan, appealing to her.

"And you really care for me too?" she managed to say at last. "I've often wondered—I never felt quite sure—it all appears so strange, so wonderful——"

"Come," he said, passing his left arm round her. "Rest your head on my shoulder, and take time. I think we've really known this ever since we met, haven't we? I felt it the very moment that I first set eyes on you."

She could no more have resisted him than a piece of steel the magnet. The man had her in his power, to do with as he liked. Her cheek sank upon his arm, and his breath played upon her eyes.

"Yes—it is true," she said at last with a sigh.

"And are you content that it should be so?" he asked her very gently.

"I never knew what happiness was before," she

answered. "The world has been a different place to me since I knew you."

"We belong to each other," he repeated, "and that is all about it."

She did not contradict him. For some time they did not speak again, as though loath to break the spell. At last Cynthia said—

"And shall we be always together—for the rest of both our lives?"

"Always," was Veryan's reply.

"And what shall we do?" asked Cynthia, beginning to wake to realities. "Where shall we live, for instance?"

"Wherever you like," said Veryan, laughing. "We have the world before us."

"How strange!" she sighed. "I have never seen the world."

"You'll be able to do so now," he answered. "There are some places where the sun always shines—summer isles of Eden lying in dark purple spheres of sea. We'll go to the Pacific, and live on a coral island. We'll go to the Plains of Heaven, and I'll show you the house I lived in over there. Do you like travelling? We can go to Jerusalem, to Athens, to Peking if you like——"

"But suppose I'm seasick?" exclaimed Cynthia apprehensively.

"Oh, nobody's ever seasick now," laughed Veryan. "And you shall ride on a camel, you know, and we'll go up the Pyramids, and have a sail on the Sea

of Galilee, and pick wild-flowers on the Great Wall of China—ah, you don't know half the fun in store for you. The more you see the more you'll want to see, and whatever you want to see you shall see. There's a programme to look forward to! Have you lived in Cherryfield all your life?"

"Very nearly," replied Cynthia. "And I love it—oh, ever so much. But I shan't mind leaving it with you. I wonder what they'll do without me. Somebody will have to look after the garden when I'm gone. And then there's Nora. I wish I thought that Nora would ever be as happy as I am. Poor old Virtue, too. I don't know how she'll take it, I'm sure. She has always looked upon me as her own particular private property. She was my nurse when I was a tiny mite. I suppose Miss Jorkaway won't stay here much longer now. Oh, how queer it all is to be sure!"

"Is Virtue that grim old lady who always scowls at me in odd corners?" asked Veryan.

"Scowls! Does she? How very rude of her," said Cynthia. "I don't know why she shouldn't like you. But, Mr. Veryan——"

"Well, Miss Cherryfield?"

Cynthia laughed and blushed. "Oh, that's all very well," she said coyly, "but it isn't so easy to change all of a sudden. What shall I have to call you now?"

"Carr," said Veryan, "unless I'm to be re-christened."

"What a funny name," exclaimed Cynthia. "It's like the noise a rook makes. Well, I'll try. I dare say I shall get accustomed to it some day. Tell me —are you very rich?"

"What is being rich?" replied Veryan. "One man is poor on ten thousand a year; another is rich on five hundred. It depends on one's habits, on whether one has great expenses, on a variety of things. I know a man with twenty thousand a year who can scarcely make two ends meet. He's a very frugal man too, but then he has three houses to keep up, and a large family of daughters to provide for, and all sorts of calls upon him. I haven't anything like such an income as that, but I consider myself far richer than he is, or ever will be. Now what's your idea of a nice income?"

"Oh, don't ask me," answered Cynthia. "I can't form any idea, indeed. I think it's best to have a certain sum, and never be obliged to spend it all."

"Excellent! You've hit the nail upon the head," cried Veryan, looking pleased. "Well, I'll tell you, and you shall judge for yourself whether we shall be rich or not. My income is exactly twelve hundred pounds a year. That is a hundred pounds a month, and we shall be able to travel splendidly on that. Of course I don't know whether your father will consider it sufficient, but we shall come to some arrangement no doubt."

"I think it's a lovely income," Cynthia said. "It's

exactly what I should have chosen myself. Now tell me some more. Tell me about yourself. What are you like, really? Are you good, or wicked, or what?"

"Oh, wicked," he answered promptly.

"That's satisfactory," retorted Cynthia with a quizzical air. "And what do you *do* wicked, now? You smoke, I know."

"Smoking is a virtue," remarked Veryan. "It is conducive to equability of temper, and allays irritation. I'll let you smoke, if ever you'd like to try."

"Thank you, monsieur," she said. "But just now I'm discussing *you*. You don't gamble, do you?"

"No, I hate games."

"Nor drink?"

"Only when I'm thirsty," he replied.

"I'm afraid you're altogether too exemplary," said Cynthia, shaking her head. "You want a few redeeming vices, like the man in that play, you know."

"Much depends on circumstances and companionship," said Veryan with a grave air. "I fear that I shall never develop any respectable amount of depravity as long as I'm with you. Give me Miss Jorkaway, however, and there may be a chance for me. All the hidden monstrosities of my nature begin to move and work under her magic influence. There's nothing I don't feel capable of—perjury, forgery, arson, and aggravated assault. If you want to know me thoroughly, Cynthia—to see the dark

and truculent side of my character, as well as the—well, the one I habitually show to *you*—we must get Miss Jorkaway to live with us after we are married. There, now, I have told you my secret, Samson-like. The moment you get tired of my virtues, telegraph for your accomplished governess!"

"I don't want to know you any better than I do now," replied Cynthia with an enchanting smile, "and I don't think I ever shall." She put one arm round his neck, and raised her face towards his. "You are dearer to me than all the world together, and I will trust you to the grave."

"Kiss me," said Veryan in a whisper.

They sat there half-an-hour longer, lapped in golden dreams and conscious of nobody's existence but their own. To both it seemed that the cup of life's happiness which they had imagined full had yet had room enough for one more, and that the divinest, drop, and this was now poured into it. When at last they rose the eyes of Cynthia were bright with tears and laughter; she felt uplifted from the world and all its griefs to be the denizen of some higher and diviner sphere, like a mortal who had become a goddess.

"Let us go back now," said Veryan. "I shall speak to your father to-night."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A RUDE AWAKENING.

IT is perhaps a pity that the scientific knowledge which enables the Meteorological Bureau to furnish us with weather forecasts at the beginning of each day does not yet extend to changes in the moral and social atmosphere. At the same time, persons endowed with the observant faculty have ventured upon a few generalizations which are frequently justified by events, and afford an indication, more or less reliable, of what may be expected under certain defined conditions. People in trouble and perplexity are thus encouraged by the reflection, based (so it is said) on experience, that the darkest hour is that before the dawn; which means, I suppose, that when things have become so bad that they can scarcely get much worse, the next change will probably be for the better. There is a friendly warning, too, in the theory that after a period of calm a storm is to be looked for; and though the storm may clear the air, and very often does, it is unpleasant while it lasts, and is apt to leave wreckage behind it. There is

prudence, no doubt, in following the injunction to make hay while the sun shines; yet your hay may be spoilt if the rain comes on before it is garnered, while a long spell of summer-heat has the disadvantage of bringing out the adder. Such is the correspondence between the physical universe and what may be called the imponderables in human life, but those who can discern the face of the sky are not always as successful in deciphering the signs of the times in which they live.

It may be thought a curious thing that none of the worthy persons assembled at Cherryfield Hall had any inkling of the real relations between Cynthia Cherryfield and Veryan. Not a word, indeed, had been uttered to suggest the faintest suspicion on the subject, and when Veryan disappeared into the Squire's study after dinner and remained there an unconscionable time nothing was felt in the drawing-room but a regret for his unheard violin. Miss Jork-away, it is true, was conscious of a longing to get fresh speech with him. The exciting half-confidences of the morning still rang tantalisingly in her ears, and she was anxious for them to be followed up. But she amused herself in his absence by watching Hugh and Cynthia, and was delighted to notice the unusual sweetness and kindliness of the girl's bearing towards her suitor. In her heart of hearts she thought Hugh's chance a poor one. Yet it was by no means undesirable, she reasoned, that, supposing Cynthia had been a trifle dazzled by Veryan, the counter

distraction of ardent wooing from another quarter should be brought to bear upon her; while for herself, his promise that she should know all his secrets lay like a hidden treasure in her heart, and, coupled with his allusive hint at marriage, gave rise to an exultant conviction that her own future was now implicitly assured. The very indirectness of the hint had a delicacy about it which charmed her; a man like Veryan could never adopt the gross plainness of speech natural to coarser minds, and the compliment implied in associating her with his own refined perceptions was both significant and sweet. Yes, she would soon know everything, including, she felt sure, the mystery of the Crotchetts' sudden departure to the place where the great robbery had been committed. Whether Veryan had or had not had a hand in it she was not certain; at present she was inclined to doubt it; but of two things she was convinced,—that so brilliant and daring a person as her hero could not be judged by the standards of the common herd, and that the jewel business at Lord Llwydiarth's might be only an incident in some colossal scheme for the enfranchisement and regeneration of the world.

Veryan did not reappear that night, and the infatuated lady was eventually fain to retire without another glimpse of him. At breakfast the next morning he came in rather late, having, he said, been getting up an appetite in the garden; and an excellent appetite he had. It was not until the party

had dispersed after the meal was over that Miss Jorkaway's opportunity arrived. He was just going upstairs to fetch his cigar-case, she was crossing the hall; and there happened to be no one else about. She promptly stopped him, and congratulated him upon his bright appearance.

"How happy you look this morning," she observed with an inviting smile. "A walk in the garden before breakfast seems to agree with you. I wish I had been up in time. I envy you your good spirits."

"Yes, I am happy enough," replied Veryan with a light laugh.

"Happier than usual, even," said Miss Jorkaway, putting on an air of raillery.

"Well, perhaps I am," he acknowledged with his hand upon the balustrade.

"Since yesterday?" was her coyly tentative advance.

"Since yesterday," he replied. "We must have another walk together soon," he added, not quite knowing how to get rid of her, and saying the first thing that came uppermost. "You left me in the lurch yesterday morning. I had to find my way back all alone."

"The dear, delightful man!" was the cry that arose in Miss Jorkaway's heart. "How happy I have made him, to be sure. Another walk! That means fresh confidences, more definite proposals. Yes, the sooner the better. When once the ice is broken, it's useless to beat about the bush."

The metaphor was rather mixed, but it expressed the lady's state of mind exactly. By the time her thoughts had reached this point Veryan was more than half-way upstairs, and Miss Jorkaway, descending from the clouds, began to busy herself about her duties. It occurred to her that, as there was nothing going on that forenoon, it might be as well for Cynthia to have a couple of hours' reading; but Cynthia, as it happened, was nowhere to be found, being closeted with her parents in the Squire's study. She therefore repaired to her own room to finish some work she had in hand for Mrs. Cherryfield, and gossip with Kezia Pottleberry while she made the bed; then she checked a few accounts, made out a list of things to get next time she went to the village, passed one or two of her dresses under review to see whether they wanted fresh trimmings, and finally sat down to read a novel. Meantime Hugh loafed thoughtfully about the stables, congratulating himself upon the excellent running he had made the night before in Cynthia's good graces, and feeling very grateful to Miss Jorkaway, whose insight and intelligence he now admired without reserve; while Mrs. St. Paul, with Dr. Tabernacle in tow, sauntered along the paths on the shady side of the garden, discoursing upon the moral loveliness of acquiescence in the inevitable. This was so very favourite a subject with the fair philosopher in her talks with the unlucky man as to provoke a suspicion on the part of Miss Walker, whose cynicism was

really shocking, that her theories were intended to have a personal bearing upon the doctor himself; to convince him, in fact, that it was his inevitable fate to marry his Egeria in his own despite, and that the sooner he acquiesced in it the more beautifully would his moral loveliness shine forth. Nora, who had settled down to a quiet hour or two with one of the solid books she loved, was interrupted by a summons to her father's study at about half-past ten, and Lady Marian was invited to assist at the proceedings. By eleven o'clock everything was known, or might be known. The Squire and Mrs. Cherryfield had given their cordial, though provisional, consent to the marriage of Mr. Carr Veryan with Cynthia.

The news flew. Astonishment, delight, congratulations were expressed on all sides. Even the icy Blanche thought it not incompatible with high breeding to mumble, "I sincerely wish you joy," and to imprint a sort of kiss on Cynthia's cheekbone that felt like a contact with cold steel. Lady Marian's felicitations, if not quite so exuberant as Miss Walker's, were cordial and affectionate in the extreme. In the middle of the excitement Mrs. St. Paul, having come to the end of her prolation, entered from the garden, and also avowed her approval. "There's an example of acquiescence for you!" she seemed to say to old Tabernacle, glancing towards that ungrateful reprobate as she gracefully saluted Cynthia. Veryan, of course, came in for his share of the ordeal, and got through it with consummate ease and tact.

In half-an-hour everybody knew it but Miss Jorkaway and Hugh. Neither, however, was long left in ignorance. It was proclaimed in the servants' hall by Williams the butler, who had had occasion to enter the room while the congratulations were going on. He it was who descended the kitchen stairs three steps at a time, bursting with the news. "Miss Cynthia's got engaged to that there Mr. Veryan, and the master's given 'is consent." In these words were the tidings conveyed to the world below, and Virtue was among the first to hear them.

A slow smile, strange and unpleasant to see, gradually stole over her mouth. "It's come at last," she muttered to herself amid the chorus of wonder and excitement that broke forth around her. "The good Lord help that child." Williams was the hero of the moment. He stood, flushed and radiant, as question after question was rained upon him. "I can't tell ye no more than that," he assured the eager group. "There they was, all a-kissin' an' a-huggin' of her and wishin' 'er no end o' luck. And Mr. Veryan, too, they was all a-shakin' of his hand as if they wanted to wring it off. I guess he's a bigger swell than we thought 'e was, though 'e's always been quite the gentleman: I will say that for 'im."

"We shall 'ave a lovely wedding," said Miss Pottleberry. "How d'ye like the prospect, cook? They say one wedding makes many, and Miss Cynthia's showing you a good example, anyhow."

"Go along wi' your impidence!" cried the cook. "Virtue Sexton, I wish you'd keep that gal in order; she knows too much, she does. Well, I'm sorry we're goin' to lose Miss Cynthia. But that's the way o' the world. It's allays the fairest flower as gets picked the first."

Unfortunately both the appeal to her authority and the poetical reflection that followed it were lost on Virtue, who by this time had turned to leave the room. She went upstairs, the chatter of excited voices in the servants' hall falling on deaf ears, and made her way to the chamber of Miss Jorkaway. The time for action had arrived, and Miss Jorkaway, poor blinded creature as Virtue consistently esteemed her, would have a part to play.

The governess was sitting in a low easy chair by the open window, engrossed in a thrilling tale. She said, "Come in!" as Virtue's knock was heard, but did not immediately look up; in fact, she had just come to a most exciting incident, and was rather loath to be disturbed. Virtue quietly shut the door, and stood a few feet from her, waiting in silence. Then Miss Jorkaway raised her eyes and closed the book, keeping her finger between the leaves so as not to lose the place. "Well, Virtue," she said rather absently, "and what's the news with you?"

"What we've been looking for has come to pass," answered Virtue briefly.

"I don't understand you," said Miss Jorkaway, looking puzzled. "Has anything unusual occurred?"

"The man as calls himself Veryan"—answered Virtue; and then shut her mouth.

"Mr. Veryan! What about Mr. Veryan?" exclaimed the governess with dignity, but feeling vaguely uneasy all the same.

"You can't guess?" pursued Virtue, with eyes fixed upon her.

"No, I can't guess," replied Miss Jorkaway very irritably. "For goodness' sake, woman, don't stand staring there, but say straight out what it is. What has happened to Mr. Veryan, pray?"

"Engaged to Cynthia," said Virtue.

"Engaged to Cynthia!" shrieked Miss Jorkaway, starting to her feet. "You're mad, Virtue. It isn't true—it isn't possible. Engaged to Cynthia! Why, he's as good as engaged to"—she stopped short suddenly on the very brink of the pronoun. "It was only yesterday—this morning, even, only an hour ago—no, no, it isn't possible! How dare you come here with such a wicked story?"

The old woman looked at her with wonder mingling in her stolidity. "The Squire's given 'is consent, and they're all congratulating of 'em in the dining-room this moment," she said; and there was no longer any room for doubt even to her shrinking listener, whose face turned almost green.

"The wretch; the vile, false, perjured, execrable wretch!" cried the unhappy woman, flinging her book upon the bed. "Oh, I see it all now; this is the plot, is it, and I was to be his catspaw!" In

what way she was to have been used in that capacity Miss Jorkaway did not stop to think, and might have had some difficulty in explaining. "But I'll foil him yet. Marry Cynthia, indeed! Why, I know enough about him to hang him. Oh, the villain; the hypocritical, designing villain. He'd be glad enough now, I expect, if he hadn't made those disgraceful confessions to me yesterday morning. Why, he avowed himself a sympathiser, an accomplice, of anarchists and assassins with the most shameless effrontery, and led me to believe—Oh, it's frightful to think of such depravity," concluded the governess in a final burst of indignation. "But he shall never marry Cynthia. I'll teach him what it is to play fast and loose with two women at once, or my name's not Matilda Jorkaway."

"Sure you was never thinking of 'im for yourself?" exclaimed Virtue, bewildered by this incoherent outburst.

"Oh, hold your tongue, do!" snapped the governess, dashing away an angry tear. "Am I the sort of woman—but there, no matter." She folded her arms tightly and began pacing the room in her exasperation. "Bah! it makes me sick to think of it. And yet it must be thought of; this monstrous marriage must be stopped, whatever happens. I shall go straight to Mrs. Cherryfield myself; it's no good talking to the Squire. Oh, that little designing minx! It would serve her right to let her marry him and take the consequences, I declare it would.

He's made her as deceitful as he is himself. But never mind that now; we've no time to lose, we must arrange our plans——"

"If you say another word against Cynthia I'll go out o' the room!" Virtue blazed forth. "The child's got to suffer, and no one shall abuse 'er in my hearing. Now what do you intend to do?"

"I intend, as I've already told you," replied the governess, walking excitedly up and down, "to speak to Mrs. Cherryfield. I shall be perfectly calm, perfectly collected. I shall simply put before her certain facts and certain suspicions. And I shall discriminate carefully and conscientiously between the two. I only wish I were a little surer about that burglary affair! There's *not* very much to go on there, I am afraid. Still, I can manage to throw it in, somehow. I know enough to make things uncommonly disagreeable for him to begin with; and then, Virtue, it'll be for you to back me up."

Virtue smiled sardonically. "I don't know what your game may be, miss, or what object you've got in view. Whether you know much about the man, I kind o' doubt; seems to me it's more guesswork than anything else. But *I* know something, and what I've got to say won't need no backin'-up from you or anybody. Just you tell the mistress when you speak to her that Virtue's got something to say as well. You'll be able to arouse her suspicions, and then I'll tell my secret."

"Your secret! What, have you really got a secret

about him that I don't know?" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway, wheeling round.

"Yes, I have," said Virtue, "and *my* secret it's goin' to be until the proper time. It's easy to see as you're jealous, and a jealous woman's a dangerous enemy for any man. But it's me as is to strike the blow."

The governess looked at the old woman as though she could have torn the truth from her by force; but she knew her too well to fancy she could change her resolution. "Ah, that name in the book!" she ejaculated, half to herself. Virtue gave no sign. "Well, I suppose there's no more to be said at present, and you'd better leave me now. I must think over all this, it has taken me so utterly by surprise. Oh, the treacherous deceiver; the wicked, heartless wretch!"

"Sure if he's such a bad lot you must be very glad you ain't a-goin' to have him," remarked Virtue dryly.

"Ah, you don't know, you don't know," cried the slighted woman, bursting into tears. "I can't tell you—you wouldn't understand it if I did. I thought so differently of him this morning; I thought I had misunderstood him all along, and that—that—— But all that's over now," concluded Miss Jorkaway with an effort to recover her self-control, "and he shall rue his infamy to the latest hour of his life."

"Well, miss, I'd far sooner he married you than Cynthia, if that's any consolation," said Virtue, turn-

ing to depart. "I'll be off now, and you can let me know how things is going. I'm ready, mind, as soon as you've had your say."

"I shan't forget, never fear," replied Miss Jorkaway with fervour as she dried her eyes. "And, Virtue, just ask Mrs. Cherryfield, will you, to excuse me to-day at lunch. Say I've got one of my bad headaches coming on, and am lying down upstairs."

She felt that it would be impossible for her to meet the family as long as the excitement and bustle of the great event were at their height, and she particularly wanted to avoid Cynthia. To join her congratulations to those of the others would impose too violent a strain upon her feelings altogether, besides committing her to an apparent approval of the match that might hamper her subsequent policy; while any coldness in her demeanour would naturally give offence, and that she must steer clear of. No, she would wait quietly upstairs to regain her composure, review the situation calmly, and mature her plans; and a spasm of fierce joy passed through her as she thought of the strong ally she had in Virtue, who so mysteriously hinted that, even if her own case broke down, she, the girl's nurse from the very cradle, knew something about the exultant lover which would blast his prospects, and make all idea of an engagement between him and Cynthia an outrage and an impossibility.

The hours that succeeded were perhaps the longest and the dreariest that Miss Jorkaway had ever en-

dured. Nothing but the delightful certainty of her vengeance enabled her to get through them, for she could no longer read, and all her pleasant dreams of the previous four-and-twenty hours had vanished never to return. At two o'clock she rang for Kezia, and managed to eat a tolerable luncheon of sandwiches with a tumblerful of light red wine; after which she felt distinctly better, and braced up for the part she had to play. A feverish eagerness now took possession of her, and she became impatient for her opportunity. Two hours later she learned, through the handmaiden she favoured, that tea was just being served in the drawing-room, and that afterwards the ladies and gentlemen were all going out for a row. Was everybody going? she asked. No, Kezia thought not; at any rate the mistress was staying at home, and one of the gentlemen—she could not be sure which. But the Squire was to join the party, and Kezia supposed that the others would all go too.

That decided Miss Jorkaway. She waited till the sound of running footsteps and closing of doors proclaimed that the field was clear, and then, after a few touches to her dress, slowly descended the staircase. Yes, everybody was away, and the house seemed empty enough. Then she opened the drawing-room door, and looked in, thinking that Mrs. Cherryfield would probably be there. It was a large double room, lying partly in the shadow, and at first she could not see whether it was occupied or not. As she advanced, however, she descried a figure

lying lazily in an armchair with its back towards her. The next moment it sprang up and stood confronting her upon the hearthrug. With a guilty start she recognised the moody, louring features of Hugh Crotchett; an individual she had entirely forgotten in her agitation, and whom she had no desire in the world to meet.

He glared at her for a minute with a harsh, contemptuous expression before which she quailed. "Oh, you clever woman!" he exclaimed at last.

CHAPTER XIX.

MISS JORKAWAY OPENS FIRE.

IT is always painful to be proved a fool; but it is little short of torture to be proved a fool by a bigger fool than yourself, or one whom you have been accustomed to regard as such. And there was no one in the entire house whom Miss Jorkaway despised as she despised Hugh Crotchett; in her eyes he was the veriest blockhead that had crossed her path, a numskull, a noodle, a dolt, and whatnot. To be taunted, therefore, by him for such stupidity as hers was a humiliation too keen to be borne, especially as she had no defence. It was all very well to prate of Veryan's infidelity, but she knew in her heart of hearts that she had blundered past forgiveness, and was unable to patch up the slightest plausible excuse. So she just threw up her hands and fled, amid Hugh's continued jeers. "No other fellow in the field, eh?" he shouted at her as she disappeared. "*You* knew all about it, *you* did! Oh, yes. We other people were too stupid to understand, and you were the only one! I say—look here

—I want a little advice. Won't you be gracious enough to give me the benefit of some more of your precious wisdom, please?"

Miss Jorkaway slammed the door behind her to prevent her ears being offended by these rude remarks. "Disgusting boor!" she muttered angrily. "He's been drinking. The idea of his daring to insult me so!" It was necessary for her to delay her invasion of Mrs. Cherryfield's boudoir for a few minutes until she had recovered from the attack. "Now for it," she said at last; and knocked gently at the door.

"Why, Miss Jorkaway, we haven't seen you all day," said the good lady, looking up as the governess entered. "I was so sorry to hear you had a headache. Are you sure it's better now? The others have gone out for an hour or two on the water, and I'm left all alone."

"Thank you, my head is much better," replied Miss Jorkaway, as she sat down and began to knit. "I hope you didn't miss me—there was nothing you wanted me to do, was there?"

"Oh, no, nothing at all," Mrs. Cherryfield assured her. "It's very good of you to come and keep me company. I'm quite worn out, we've had such a fatiguing day."

"It *has* been very warm," assented Miss Jorkaway.

Mrs. Cherryfield fidgeted a little, as though not quite sure of her ground. "And naturally we've

been so much excited, you know. I suppose you've heard the news?"

"The news?" inquired Miss Jorkaway, with an innocent air.

"Yes—why I thought you'd have been sure to know it," rejoined Mrs. Cherryfield. "Dear Cynthia is engaged to Mr. Veryan."

"Really," replied Miss Jorkaway in a tone of cold politeness. "Well, I think I did hear some rumour of the sort this morning, but I put it down to gossip among the servants. To Mr. Veryan, too. He is an old friend of yours, no doubt?"

"Well, we haven't known him very long," admitted Mrs. Cherryfield, surprised at the governess's manner. "But we know quite enough of him to approve the marriage. Mr. Veryan is a most charming man, and both the Squire and myself are fully satisfied with his representations. Dear Cynthia, too, seems to be devotedly attached to him; indeed, they are both devoted to each other. And of course, as long as she is happy, we have no more to wish."

Miss Jorkaway closed her lips with a dry, unsympathetic cough that had a very disconcerting effect on Mrs. Cherryfield. "Of course, dear Cynthia's happiness must be your first consideration," she remarked, after a pause. "I am glad to hear you have such good reason to be satisfied with her choice. She's very young, isn't she?"

"Well, she is young," said Mrs. Cherryfield, "but still——"

"That is not of much consequence supposing that Mr. Veryan is all you believe him to be," interposed Miss Jorkaway.

"All I believe him to be?" echoed Mrs. Cherryfield with a touch of hauteur. "My dear Miss Jorkaway, that sounds almost like an insinuation. The subject is scarcely one that I can discuss with you in all its details, as you must perceive yourself. I hoped that you would have rejoiced with us in the prospect of my daughter's happiness, for I am sure you are very fond of her," added the good lady propitiatingly. "And I don't suppose the wedding will be yet awhile, of course."

"Ahem," coughed the governess, more dryly than before.

Mrs. Cherryfield now felt rather offended. She immediately dropped the subject, and spoke of other things. "Those geraniums want water," she said, rising abruptly and going to a flower-stand near the window. "I must see to them when the day gets rather cooler. I wish you'd remind me to speak to the gardener about the lawn, too; I always forget, and it ought to have been mowed a week ago." Then relenting, and perhaps a little curious to fathom the mystery of the governess's strange demeanour, she gradually came back to her seat and began fanning herself. "I think this is the very hottest day we've had yet," she remarked in an exhausted tone. "I hope those girls won't go and overheat themselves; there's always such a glare upon the river."

Then Miss Jorkaway fired her first shot. "Would it surprise you very much, Mrs. Cherryfield, to hear that only yesterday morning Mr. Veryan was on the verge of a proposal to *me?*" she said, indifferently.

Mrs. Cherryfield nearly bounded out of her chair. "Mr. Veryan! To *you?*" cried the astonished woman, scarcely believing her ears.

"Mr. Veryan. To *me,*" echoed the governess, compressing her lips and nodding her head emphatically.

"The thing's impossible!" exclaimed Mrs. Cherryfield breathlessly. "He's been in love with Cynthia ever since he came. To *you,* Miss Jorkaway? You can't be serious. This is some joke between you. Propose to you in the morning and to Cynthia in the afternoon? Preposterous! The story confutes itself."

"I did not say," replied the governess in measured accents, "that Mr. Veryan proposed. I was careful to say that he was on the verge of a proposal. His expressions were entirely unmistakable. He distinctly intimated that it was his intention to make me a formal offer before long. No words could have been plainer; and we had arrived at a thorough understanding by the time we reached the village. And it was only this very morning that he hinted at a fresh appointment. Oh, I know what I'm talking about, Mrs. Cherryfield; I'm not a woman to be mistaken in an affair like this, I can assure you."

"You take my breath away," said Mrs. Cherryfield in her bewilderment. "I cannot believe it true.

Not that I doubt your word, Miss Jorkaway, of course; but it is clear to me that you have been misled. You must have misunderstood something that he said to you. Why should he want to marry one woman and then propose to another a couple of hours afterwards?"

"That," replied Miss Jorkaway with a certain lifting of the eyebrows, "is a question he is no doubt better able to answer than I am. Mr. Veryan is far too clever a man to do anything without a reason; though whether he will confess his reason on merely being asked to do so is another matter. I fear, Mrs. Cherryfield, that you know very little of your intended son-in-law. I think I know more than you do; I know something about him, anyhow; and that something leads me to suspect more—a good deal more, if I am to speak quite plainly. But whether I speak plainly or whether I hold my tongue depends entirely upon yourself. His antecedents affect you, not me. Tell me you wish me to be silent, and I will obey at once. I pledge you my word that I will not utter another syllable upon the subject."

"Impossible!" cried Mrs. Cherryfield. "You have said too much for silence now. I insist upon your telling me everything; although I don't promise you to believe the half of it—and I really don't see that you can expect me to, unless you prove your words."

"That will be for you to judge," was Miss Jorkaway's answer. "Are you aware that Mr. Veryan both reads and writes in Russian?"

"No, I'm not," said Mrs. Cherryfield. "What if he does?"

"That will appear later," replied the governess. "Do you know anything of his political opinions?"

"No, I don't," said Mrs. Cherryfield. "Tory or Radical, what does it matter to us?"

"Oh, nothing—if he's only a Tory or a Radical," returned Miss Jorkaway, firing her second shot. "But what if he's an Anarchist? What if he upholds assassination? What if one of his friends, at least—and there may be scores—is a convicted murderer; a wretch who has murdered seven men? But let me be just! The man was not a vulgar criminal; he was a *political* assassin only. What do you make of that? You are wavering, Mrs. Cherryfield. Let me remind you of what the Rector told us when he called here a few days ago. England, he said, was swarming with conspirators. Some were spies in the pay of the Russian Government, some were the foes of all Governments alike, ready for any desperate deed—and all these men are to be met with anywhere, in society, in the City, even in country houses. And we know that they stick at no outrages, however aimless, if they can make them subservient to the ultimate ends they have in view. It does sound a little serious, doesn't it? And then, you know, I couldn't help remembering that mysterious robbery at the house where Mr. Veryan had just been staying. I don't know what put it into my head, but it came upon me all the same, just like

a flash of light. The police, you know, have given it as their opinion that the organiser of that crime must have been a man to whom all the ins and outs of the house were familiar, and who knew exactly where the jewels were kept. Well, Lord Llwydiarth had actually shown the jewels and their hiding-place to Mr. Veryan a few days before he came away. Put all these things together, calmly and dispassionately, and what is the conclusion—no, not the conclusion; but the suggestion—that is forced upon one's mind? I will not put it into words. I will confine myself to saying that you ought to know a great deal more about Mr. Veryan than you do before you allow him to marry Cynthia."

Miss Jorkaway took up the work she had let fall, and resumed her knitting peacefully. Poor Mrs. Cherryfield sat gazing at her with a look of incredulous amazement—the look of a woman who is suddenly confronted with some great perplexity, some vaguely threatening danger, which she scarcely knows how to deal with. "But how do you know all this?" she asked, with a querulous raising of the voice.

"I know it from Mr. Veryan's own lips," replied Miss Jorkaway. "I led him on when we were walking yesterday; I laid traps for him, and he walked into them with his eyes wide open. He made no secret of his political sympathies, which are exactly what I have described, and he promised that I should know more about him shortly. It was then that he

hinted at marriage and at common interests. I suppose he thought that with my insight, and observation, and knowledge of the world, I should be of use to him. Ha, ha, ha! You may imagine, dear Mrs. Cherryfield, how I 'played' him. It was diamond cut diamond with us all the time."

"I don't know what to think," exclaimed Mrs. Cherryfield, considerably distressed. "It is dreadful to think that a man who stands in such a position towards us as Mr. Veryan should be an object of suspicion at all, however groundless. And really, Miss Jorkaway, I don't think you have much to go upon. I didn't hear what took place between you, and so I can't judge, of course; but I can't help thinking that—that—oh, you must have misunderstood him, I am sure. The whole thing is so utterly incredible, so incredible on the very face of it. And then, about that robbery! Why, there's not an atom of proof; nothing but the vaguest possible suspicion. I can never believe that, never."

"Quite so," returned Miss Jorkaway, without raising her eyes from her knitting. "I was careful to distinguish between suspicions on the one hand and facts on the other. Of the facts there can be no reasonable doubt, and all I say of them is that they *suggest* suspicions. No attitude of mind could be more guarded than that, I am sure. And if there *is* anything wrong, you know, how much better it would be to find it out before dear Cynthia's marriage to him, than afterwards, when it is too late, remember."

A pause ensued, during which Mrs. Cherryfield sat frowning and biting her lips in great annoyance and perplexity. "How do you know he reads Russian?" she said at last, curtly.

"I've seen him," replied Miss Jorkaway.

"I suppose a man may read Russian, and yet not want to blow up the Emperor?" pursued the irritated lady.

"Certainly," allowed the governess. "But, dear Mrs. Cherryfield, look at it in this light. One fact, taken by itself, proves nothing. But half a dozen facts, each apparently quite innocent and insignificant, taken together, may prove a great deal. That is my view, and I believe that any lawyer or detective you might ask would tell you that I am right."

"It is a most unpleasant business," exclaimed Mrs. Cherryfield, rising once more and walking up and down the room. "I am more thoroughly annoyed than I can say." Part, at any rate, of the honest lady's trouble arose from the recollection of her own misgivings when she invited Veryan to the house. Certainly she had known nothing about him then, and though she had met him at Sir Robert Southwell's the people there seemed quite in the dark about him too. His representations to the Squire had been, as she avowed, most satisfactory, but who was to vouch for their truth? "Still, I am not convinced, you understand; not in the least convinced. All this may be explained, I'm sure. And of course it will have to be investigated. I

shall take a day or two to think over it all, and then decide what is to be done."

"That will be the best way, certainly," said the astute diplomatist, who had succeeded beyond her hopes.

Mrs. Cherryfield continued to pace the floor. "You seem pretty sure of your ground," she remarked in a tone of unmistakable resentment, "but you'll find yourself in a very disagreeable position, Miss Jorkaway, if it all turns out a mare's-nest. I suppose you've counted the cost."

The governess did not quail before this threat. "My duty before everything!" she rejoined.

"Veryan is such a good name, too," wistfully continued Mrs. Cherryfield, resuming the thread of her meditations. "There are Veryans in Cornwall, I believe. Lord Eagletower's daughter married a Veryan, I remember, about twenty years ago. A Veryan go in for burglary and assassination? Never!"

"You're sure his name *is* Veryan?" put in Miss Jorkaway, firing her third shot.

"Miss Jorkaway!" cried the tormented lady, suddenly facing her in a little burst of anger. "This is past endurance. What possible reason can you have for such an abominable insinuation as that?"

"My reason will appear at the proper time," answered the governess firmly. "I have been very frank with you, Mrs. Cherryfield, and have told you nearly everything I know myself. But I decline to

say more at present. I have grounds for suspecting that Mr. Veryan has not always passed under the name that he now bears. Let that suffice. There is more in all this than you are probably aware of."

Poor Mrs. Cherryfield dropped into her chair again, the picture of tribulation. All this was dreadful to her; and although her good sense told her that Miss Jorkaway's theories were based upon the flimsiest possible foundations, the calm assurance of the governess's manner made her shudder in spite of herself. It would not have mattered so much, it would not have mattered at all, if Cynthia's happiness had not been involved. There lay the sting of the whole trouble. If there proved to be even an ounce of truth in a pound of imagination, Cynthia's fresh young life might be permanently blighted, and her own imprudence would be the cause of it. It was a sore trial to her not to take immediate action, not to tell her husband, not to lay hands on Veryan the moment he returned and confront him with all these calumnies. But she felt that it would be a mistake to do anything in a hurry. A day or two's reflection was absolutely necessary, that she might have a chance of watching him, and time to see things in their true light, and she bravely repressed her impatience. To Miss Jorkaway, on the other hand, the interview had afforded unmixed content. Her blood once up, she enjoyed the combat, relying upon the trump card that she knew was held by Virtue. There was now no more to be said, and

the entrance of one of the servants on a little domestic matter which would occupy Mrs. Cherryfield some time put an end to the conversation at precisely the proper moment.

The dinner-hour was approaching when the sound of merry voices outside announced the return of the water-party. The governess gathered up her knitting and went out into the hall as they entered. "Oh, Miss Jorkaway, I'm so glad your head is better," cried Cynthia in her ringing tones. "We've been out for a ride in a boat, as Virtue calls it. It's been such fun, we were nearly upset once. What a pity you couldn't come!"

It was impossible for Miss Jorkaway to avoid the situation altogether. She ignored the presence of Veryan, who was standing by, and, with an ambiguous though not unkindly smile, pressed Cynthia's hand. "I'm glad you've been happy, my dear Cynthia, and I hope you always will be," she said pointedly. The girl blushed and glanced at Veryan. Then Miss Jorkaway glanced at him, and cut him dead; if that might be called cutting which was simply an omission to speak when a few kind words seemed natural. The incident was over in a moment, and the party dispersed to dress.

Now when an engagement between two persons is first announced, there is always, probably, a certain self-consciousness, a feeling of new conditions to which there has been no time to get accustomed, affecting not only the principals but all who are in

contact with them. This is, of course, somewhat embarrassing while it lasts; in the present case, however, the inevitable stage in question was speedily got over, thanks to that informality and freedom from restraint which characterises out-of-door proceedings. Everybody seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed the couple of hours spent upon the water, and the dinner which succeeded was an unusually cheerful meal. Miss Jorkaway took care to appear late, and as soon as she entered the drawing-room she attached herself to Mrs. St. Paul, with whom she always got on very well. She took little or no part in the conversation at table, but watched and listened silently. Cynthia was as happy as a bird; the Squire, excited and refreshed by his unaccustomed exercise, talked and joked with the best of them; Veryan was perhaps a shade quieter than usual, but looked the picture of content. "Be happy while you may!" thought the governess as she noticed his calm felicity. Certainly he had not the appearance of a man over whose head so terrible a storm was gathering—a storm far worse than even Miss Jorkaway imagined. Then she glanced at Nora, whose gaiety struck her as just a trifle feverish. Nora laughed and chatted in a way that attracted her attention; and every now and then, during a pause in the conversation, she fancied she saw a look of weariness in the girl's eyes, a hidden pain, which the high spirits did their best to conquer and suppress. Was it possible, wondered the governess,

that Nora cared for Veryan too? That quiet, studious, self-contained young woman—could she have fallen a victim to the fascinations of her sister's lover? Unlikelier things had happened; it was by no means inconceivable. But whether it was so or not, the complications of the situation were not likely to be affected one way or the other. They lay entirely outside the scope of Nora's influence,—unless, indeed, it could be proved that Veryan had been courting her as well, in which case things would probably go even harder with him than under present circumstances.

Of course, the two persons who felt really ill at ease were Mrs. Cherryfield and Hugh. Young Crotchett made no attempt to conceal his sullenness, and every now and then shot a vindictive glance at his deceptive monitress. Mrs. Cherryfield did her best to maintain a smiling face, but it was a very painful effort. She looked wistfully at Cynthia, whose flow of spirits frightened her; she looked scrutinisingly at Veryan, the impersonation of careless, happy ease, of accepted lovership, of brilliant manly beauty. Was it possible, the poor lady asked herself, that that handsome, winning countenance was nothing but a mask of villainy: that disgraceful secrets were locked up in that sunny head: that the man was a base adventurer, who had no right to the name he bore? It was the first real anxiety Mrs. Cherryfield had ever known, the first concealment she had ever practised towards her husband, and it

weighed heavily upon her heart. But she determined that she would not bear it long. Nothing, that she could see, was to be gained by procrastination, and she promised herself that she would have it out with Veryan and his accuser, in the presence of the Squire, before another day was over.

CHAPTER XX.

FACE TO FACE.

"A LETTER for me, another for you, two for Lady Marian, four newspapers for Dr. Tabernacle, three circulars, and a letter for Hugh Crotchett. Not much of a budget to-day," said Squire Cherryfield, as he emptied the postbag on the following afternoon in the privacy of his comfortable study.

Mrs. Cherryfield glanced at the address on her envelope with an absent air. "It's only from the dressmaker, I think," she said as she carelessly tore it open. "I wonder whether that one for Hugh is from Sir Thomas? Perhaps it is to say when they are coming back."

"Dear me, this is interesting indeed," exclaimed the Squire, engrossed in his correspondence. "Professor Eberhardt of Leipsic believes that he has discovered a new poison. What a benefactor of his species that man is to be sure! And what an indefatigable investigator! I rather doubt it, though. One is so easily led astray, you know, by some of these combinations. I expect old Borgia knew all

about it; it's probably only an old friend in a new dress. Don't you remember, some years ago——"

"Yes, yes, I remember," interrupted Mrs. Cherryfield nervously. "Just touch the bell, Reginald, will you, and I'll send those people their letters. Monmouth!" she exclaimed, examining the postmark on Hugh's envelope. "It is from Sir Thomas; I thought it must be."

The Squire touched the bell, and the letters were given to the servant for distribution.

"Well, I hope it is to say he's coming back," said the worthy gentleman, returning to his own letter. "He'll take a great interest in this. Of course he hasn't an expert's knowledge of the subject, but he's a very cultured man, and highly intelligent in his way. Where's Tabernacle, I wonder? I must tell him all about it. We have capital arguments, Tabernacle and I. And I always beat him, you know, because he's always wrong. My dear, I wish you'd tell Tabernacle to come here when he's disengaged. I want to talk with him. There's a point here I'm not quite sure about, and he may jog my memory. You see Eberhardt insists that when any alkaloid of aconite, say lycoctonine——"

Mrs. Cherryfield heaved a little sigh of despair as the Squire, now fully mounted on his hobby, launched into an interminable dissertation of which she did not hear one word. She knew that it would be useless to try and check him midway, so contented herself with uttering a little monosyllable every now

and then, burning all the time with ill-suppressed impatience that the Squire, of course, never noticed. At last, having triumphantly proved himself in the right, and smitten the opponents of his theory hip and thigh, the Squire folded up the letter with a complacent smile, and again expressed a wish for Tabernacle. Then his wife felt that her hour had arrived, and laid her hand on his.

"Reginald," she said in an unsteady voice, "never mind Dr. Tabernacle just now. There's something I want to say."

The Squire fumbled for his eyeglasses and could not find them. "Something you want to say?" he repeated. "Oh, here they are. I wonder how ever they got on my shoulder. Why, there's nothing the matter, is there?"

"It's about Cynthia and Mr. Veryan," replied Mrs. Cherryfield. "You don't think, do you, that we were too hasty in giving our consent?"

"Too hasty?" exclaimed the Squire, taken aback. "It didn't occur to me at the time that we were too hasty. Why, what has put that into your head?"

"We really don't know very much about him, you know," observed his wife tentatively.

"No, nothing but what he told us," the Squire admitted, "but that was satisfactory enough. He's a man of independent means, and he has hitherto spent his life in travelling. Family respectable and wealthy, parents dead, sister settled in South Africa, no encumbrances of any kind. For the rest, we can

judge what sort of a man he is ourselves. A gentleman beyond question, an artist to the finger-tips, and deeply in love with Cynthia. And when we add to that that Cynthia's deeply in love with him, I really do not see how the situation could be improved."

"Very nicely put," said Mrs. Cherryfield with an indulgent smile. "But, my dear, it's the very fact that Cynthia is so devoted to him that disturbs me. Suppose we were to find out anything wrong about him, think how dreadful it would be!"

"Oh, but we only gave our consent provisionally," replied the Squire, looking very shrewd. "On condition that everything he said was true. It was on the basis of his representations that we agreed to sanction the engagement. If those representations were to turn out false, of course there'd be an end of the whole thing. So you can make your mind quite easy, my dear; in that case we shouldn't be bound to him in any way."

"But you forget Cynthia! Think how she would suffer," exclaimed Mrs. Cherryfield.

"H'm," muttered the Squire thoughtfully. "Yes, I never thought of that. I suppose she would. But anyhow, the mischief was done before we were asked o consent to it; they've probably been falling in love the whole time—ever since Veryan appeared."

"Yes, that was my fault," said Mrs. Cherryfield in a low voice. "It was I who asked him here."

"Well, but why meet trouble half way?" asked

the Squire, looking curiously at his wife. "I never do; there couldn't be a greater mistake. We've no reason to suppose that Veryan's not all right that I'm aware of, have we?"

Instead of replying promptly and eagerly in the negative, as the Squire expected her to do, Mrs. Cherryfield continued silent. "I'm afraid we have, Reginald," she said after a painful pause.

"Good God!" ejaculated the Squire. "What in the name of mystery's the matter with him?"

"Well, I had a rather unpleasant interview with Miss Jorkaway yesterday afternoon," confessed Mrs. Cherryfield. "She's a very prying woman, I'm afraid, and she seems to have been picking up all sorts of gossip and scandal about Mr. Veryan that I think ought to be investigated. I can't tell you all she said, but some of her statements were astounding—I scarcely know how to repeat them. She assured me, among other things, that he had been on the verge of proposing marriage to her on the very day that he proposed to Cynthia; she more than hinted that he was engaged in all sorts of nefarious schemes — mixed up with Anarchists, murderers, and I don't know what besides; she avowed her belief that he was the moving spirit in that robbery at Lord Llwydiarth's, and finished up by insinuating, in the most brazen manner, that his name wasn't Veryan at all. Now it is clear to me that the woman knows something about him that we don't. No sane person would make such charges

against a man out of sheer spite, for they would infallibly recoil upon her own head; and unless the whole thing is a figment of her imagination there must be something behind it. My own opinion is that the two should be brought face to face immediately."

The Squire sat staring at his wife in apparently ecstatic enjoyment of her story. "What a wonderful, what a singularly interesting case!" he exclaimed admiringly. "Of course it's clear enough what's wrong. The woman's a haschisch-eater, depend upon it. Indulgence in certain poisons, you know, gives rise to some very obscure diseases of the brain, and these hallucinations are the result. You search her drawers, and see if you don't find some preparation or other of haschisch hidden away. Haschisch, you must remember, is a very peculiar drug. It affects different people in a variety of different ways. There's a story of a man——"

"My dear Reginald," interrupted his wife with a laugh she could not repress, "you see everything in the light of your own particular study. Miss Jorkaway is no haschisch-eater, believe me. She's a prying, mischief-making woman, if you like; and it is quite possible that some egregious delusion may have got possession of her, which, being now dispelled, has driven her wild with jealousy. However, there are her accusations, and they must be dealt with somehow. My advice is that she should be confronted with Mr. Veryan at once, and made

to prove her words; and unless she makes out her case—which God forbid—of course she can't be tolerated any longer here."

"We'll do it now," exclaimed the Squire, rubbing his hands. "Is Veryan in, I wonder?"

"I should think so," said Mrs. Cherryfield, beginning to pencil some memoranda upon a slip of paper. "They don't generally go out so early as this in the afternoon. Miss Jorkaway's upstairs, I know."

"Then send for them both at once," replied the Squire, "and we'll go into the affair forthwith. Veryan masquerading under an *alias*, and wanting to have Miss Jorkaway! She'll accuse my old friend Crotchett of courting the cook next. What an imagination the woman must be blessed with, to be sure!"

"I'm afraid it's something worse than imagination," returned Mrs. Cherryfield without looking up from her notes.

Miss Jorkaway was at that moment in her room, regaling Virtue with a dramatic account of the scene of the previous day. The old woman listened attentively to the narrative, nodded her head every now and then, but kept her own counsel. "Well, you seem to 'a made out a pretty good case, miss," she said, "but mind you, I know nothing about such things myself. It's nought to me whether you are right or wrong. That's your look-out, not mine. All I want is to save Cynthia from marrying a bad man,

and that I'm goin' to do. Have you any idea what the mistress is intending?"

"No," replied the governess, "except that her suspicions are aroused and that she's going to take the matter into consideration. She looked terribly uneasy last night at dinner. I quite pitied her, I'm sure, poor thing. Oh, there's plenty of time. Cynthia isn't going to be married to-morrow, and we shall hear more about it before long, no doubt."

They heard more about it before the words were well out of Miss Jorkaway's lips. There was a knock at the door, followed by a message from Mrs. Cherryfield requesting the governess to be good enough to join her immediately in the Squire's study. Miss Jorkaway sprang from her chair, and began hastily fastening a bootlace that had come undone. "The hour's arrived, Virtue!" she exclaimed excitedly. "You must come down with me, and wait in the passage outside. Be ready as soon as ever I call you. Now, Mr. Veryan, we'll see who's the strongest, you or I. It's war to the knife between us now!"

She was a plucky woman in spite of all her faults, and she felt not a moment's misgiving as she sailed downstairs to the eventful interview—pride in her port, defiance in her eye. And yet there was something to quail at, for if she failed to make good her case she would be covered with humiliation, besides losing past redemption that which she had intrigued to preserve: her position in the county family. If,

on the other hand, her insinuations against Veryan were justified, not only would that position be strengthened by the eternal gratitude of Cynthia's parents, but she would enjoy the sweets of taking her revenge upon the man who had so basely and insidiously cajoled her. It was the biggest encounter, take it all in all, that she had ever been engaged in, and she determined so to conduct her cause that her enemy should have reason to rue the day that he had ventured to cross her path.

Veryan had been lying on the grass, with Cynthia at his side, when the summons reached him from the Squire, and he had just taken his seat in the study as Miss Jorkaway entered. It is scarcely necessary to say that he had no idea whatever of the business in hand, and he raised his eyebrows in some slight surprise when the governess appeared. Mrs. Cherryfield, who looked nervous and out of sorts, signed to Miss Jorkaway to approach, and then the Squire, glancing from one to the other, plunged without any circumlocution *in medias res*.

"Mr. Veryan," he said abruptly, "I have asked you here to speak to you upon a matter of some importance to yourself, and also to us as a family with whom I hope you will, at some future time, be connected by marriage. I will only make one preliminary appeal. I shall ask you to answer certain questions; and I beg you, as a personal favour to myself, not to draw, from the nature of those questions, any unfavourable inferences respecting

my mental sanity. I prelude my inquiries with this request for reasons that will appear immediately."

"I have no difficulty whatever in acceding to that," Veryan assured him, with a twinkle in his eye.

"It is in consequence of certain communications made yesterday afternoon by Miss Jorkaway to my wife," resumed the Squire, "that the present interview is being held. I will not detain you by offering any opinion of those communications, or of the circumstances under which they were advanced; they shall speak for themselves, and your accuser shall have the fullest liberty to prove their truth if in a position to do so." Here Veryan opened his eyes with an air of incontrollable astonishment. "I now ask you, therefore, in plain words, my first question. Have you, or have you not, ever said anything to Miss Jorkaway that she was reasonably liable to understand as an intended proposal of marriage?"

"Good heavens, no!" exclaimed Veryan, unable to conceal his mirth. "What in the name of wonder——"

"You never offered her your hand?" pursued the Squire.

"Only to help her over a stile," said Veryan.

"You never hinted at any alliance, any community of interests, any revelation of secrets connected with your past life?" glancing furtively at the slip of paper in Mrs. Cherryfield's handwriting that lay upon his desk.

"Never so much as dreamt of it," said Veryan. "The idea is the sheerest moonshine."

"Good," replied the Squire. "I understand you to deny it unequivocally. Now for question number two. Are you or are you not an Anarchist?"

"I am not," said Veryan with a smile.

"Nor a spy? a conspirator of any sort or kind?"

"Neither, I seriously assure you."

"You do not sympathise with assassination?" asked the Squire, peering intently at him through his *pince-nez*.

"On general grounds, certainly not. But I hold that circumstances may conceivably arise in which it is highly desirable in the interests of an oppressed nation that a tyrant should be removed."

"Provided it's skilfully done, of course," put in the Squire eagerly. "I'm sure you would disapprove of bungling over such a business as much as I should. Yes, I'm inclined to agree with you there. I don't know whether you've ever read that great work of Guiccioli's on——"

"Reginald!" exclaimed his wife, warningly.

"My dear, I beg your pardon," said the Squire, pulling himself up. "The subject interests me, as you know, but it can be pursued later. Let me see —what's the next question? Oh, here it is. You're not on intimate terms with any murderers, are you? Because I think I should draw the line there, you know. It's one thing to take a scientific interest in removals—lethal operations, you understand—as a fine art, but it would scarcely do to——"

"My dear Sir, I am neither a murderer nor an

accomplice of murderers," interposed Veryan with a laugh he could no longer repress. "I met a fellow once who was 'wanted' for a few affairs of the sort —a Roumanian—and eventually he was captured. A very interesting man he was, too," he added; "as a pathological study, I mean, of course. In any other capacity he was rather a person to avoid."

"Dear me, how very interesting now!" exclaimed the Squire, throwing himself back in his chair and looking pleasantly at Veryan. "I've never met a live murderer; they are always caught so soon, unfortunately. Really, I quite envy you your experiences. You must tell me all about them some day. There's a fascination about these abnormal affections of the cerebral tissue——"

"My dear Reginald!" said Mrs. Cherryfield once more.

"Ah, well, that will all keep," said the Squire briskly. "Now for the next. Did you or did you not have any hand, directly or indirectly, in the jewel robbery at Lord Llwydiarth's?"

For the first time Veryan's easy, amused bearing changed. A slight flush mounted to his forehead, and he drew himself up haughtily. Then he looked at Miss Jorkaway, and remembered the Squire's request. At this extraordinary interpellation everything must be endured and condoned for the time being. He recovered himself with a visible effort, and faced his questioner calmly. "No, Sir, I had not," he replied with curtness.

"I think there's only one more thing to ask you," resumed the Squire, "and that will be easily answered. Is Veryan your true name, and do you ever adopt an *alias*?"

"Veryan is my true name, and I have never gone under an *alias* in my life," was his decisive response.

"Thank you," said the Squire with a judicial air. "Now listen to me. All the questions I have put to you are based on allegations made by Miss Jorkaway to my wife. You have denied them all, as I supposed you would. It only remains for Miss Jorkaway herself to support her case, and in order that she may have an opportunity of doing so it is necessary that we should accord her absolute freedom of speech. You, I am sure, will acknowledge the justice of this, and reply to any observations she may make as frankly as you have replied to me."

Veryan's expression relaxed, and he inclined his head assentingly. To be cross-examined by Miss Jorkaway could scarcely fail to prove a novel and amusing experience, and he had no objection to it whatever. Miss Jorkaway, on her side, now assumed the air of one who had a painful, very painful, duty to perform, but who would not evade or shrink from it. She began with some adroitness.

"Mr. Veryan, I have heard your attempt to explain away what passed between us on the morning you proffered me your escort out of doors. It would ill become me, as a woman, to pursue my advantage over you in this matter remorselessly. At the same

time it is only due to myself to state in the most unequivocal terms my belief—which I still hold—that you did make overtures to me that no intelligent person could misunderstand. You spoke of the most dreadful crimes in a totally different vein from what you have been pleased to adopt in your answers to Mr. Cherryfield. You saw that I doubted your past life, and you thereupon told me an anecdote of a man and a woman who, having reason to suspect each other of secret political intrigues, ensured themselves against each other's detection by making common cause and marrying. Our arrival immediately afterwards at a stile gave you an opportunity for hinting in the very broadest manner at a personal application of your story. 'Allow *me* to offer you my hand!' was your most significant conclusion. In other words, 'Let us take the hint, and follow their example.' I temporised, as you no doubt remember. You then promised that I should know all about you later on, and the conversation turned into other channels. It suits you at present to ignore all this. It suits me, conversely, to recall it. But let it be. I do not find it consistent with my notions of self-respect to uphold my version against yours."

Miss Jorkaway paused. She had evidently made an impression, for Mrs. Cherryfield had a troubled look upon her comely face, and the Squire sat grimly silent. Veryan contented himself with saying, "I think it very wise of you," and then she went on again.

"I think you have some Russian work in your possession, Mr. Veryan, which you study privately?"

"I have," acknowledged the accused.

"Did it always belong to you?" asked the lady.

"No," said Veryan.

"May I ask to whom it belonged before you had it?" pursued the cross-examiner.

"My good woman, how can I possibly tell? I bought it second-hand, many years ago," was his reply.

Miss Jorkaway reddened angrily at being called a good woman. "Perhaps that accounts for the name in it not being yours?" she asked him viciously.

"How do you know what name is written in it?" retorted Veryan.

"Never mind that," she replied. "Just answer my question, if you please."

"But I do mind it," insisted Veryan. "It so happens that I have never shown that book to anybody. It has only been in three places since I came here—my hands, my pocket, and my bedroom. In which of those three places did you examine it?"

"I consider the question quite irrelevant," said Miss Jorkaway, feeling ready to bite her tongue out for having allowed her temper to betray her into such a damaging admission, "and I decline to answer it."

"But you must answer it," interjected Mrs. Cherryfield sharply. "I don't think it's irrelevant at all."

"I had occasion to go into Mr. Veryan's room one

night to turn down the gas, and it was lying under my eyes," answered Miss Jorkaway in a very sulky tone.

"Open?" asked the Squire.

"Well, not exactly," confessed the unlucky woman. "I was attracted by its appearance, and just glanced at it as I was going out."

"So you invaded my bedroom and overhauled my effects one night when I was downstairs," commented Veryan. "That is a very handsome admission on your part, Miss Jorkaway, and you deserve much credit for making it. The book in question," he added, turning to the Squire, "is a collection of Russian folklore. I once learnt a little Russian (though I never spoke it) and like to keep it up. It contains a few notes of my own in shorthand, too. It occurred to me once or twice that the subject might be interesting to Sir Thomas Crotchett."

The tide was now running strongly in favour of the accused. Both the Squire and his wife felt indignant that a guest of theirs should have been subjected to such an affront as Miss Jorkaway had confessed to, and for a moment they seemed to be on the point of stopping all further questions. The discredited lady meanwhile sat with flushed face and eyes full of mortification, but there was no appearance of despair about her. In spite of her terrible slip she did not look like a woman who had come to the end of her resources. She was evidently not beaten yet.

"I have only one more thing to ask at present,"

she said, beginning to tremble with excitement. "You say your name is Veryan, and that you have never passed under an *alias*. Perhaps you will kindly explain how it is that the name in your Russian book —apparently written by yourself—is not Veryan, but Thwaites?"

Veryan's colour changed. "I decline to answer, because you have no earthly right to ask."

"You decline? Absolutely and irrevocably decline?" exclaimed Miss Jorkaway.

"I have already said so," he replied.

"Then my task is finished, and now passes into other hands," cried the governess, rising from her seat. The Squire and Mrs. Cherryfield looked at her with amazement, bewildered at this sudden move. "Virtue!" she called out, throwing open the study door. "Just step this way a moment, will you?"

CHAPTER XXI.

CONFRONTED WITH THE PAST.

UP till that point, the apprehensions of Cynthia's parents had been gradually but surely subsiding Every question, as it was asked and answered, afforded a fresh proof of the utter baselessness of Miss Jorkaway's charges, and the only wonder to both was how she had ever had the fatuity to bring them forward. They did not believe that Veryan had contemplated marriage with the woman, or had given her the slightest reason to think so. There was not the shadow of a proof that he had ever been mixed up with suspicious characters or had taken part in political intrigues in England or anywhere else; while as for her monstrous insinuation that he had had a hand in the robbery at Camelot Towers, that, the Squire observed, had been dropped out of her interrogatory altogether. But this new movement puzzled them. It looked as though Miss Jorkaway had been hitherto playing dark, simply amusing them, so to speak, with insignificant and trifling matters in order to lead up to the grand *coup* now

imminent. Her unlooked-for summons to Virtue had unmistakable menace in it. It suggested to Mrs. Cherryfield the unpleasant impression that some secret intrigue had been going on in her house unknown to her, and her hand quivered with trepidation as to what was coming next. That the governess should have been tampering with her servants filled her with a sense of indignant disgust, but that was little compared with the vague alarm she felt at the insolent assurance which now characterised Miss Jorkaway's whole bearing. All traces of mortification and embarrassment had vanished. She stood, tall and threatening, just inside the door, her back turned towards Veryan, her eyes gleaming with the anticipation of his final and complete discomfiture. He, cool as ever, sat waiting for the elucidation of the mystery, but with a sterner face. The gay *insouciance* of his manner had disappeared, and was now succeeded by a look of intense watchfulness, which, albeit tempered by a dash of the very subtlest humour, seemed to reflect a side of his character he had not shown before.

A disconcerting surprise, however, was in store for everybody. Just as Virtue was coming in, Hugh Crotchett pushed past her and entered first. Mrs. Cherryfield's immediate impulse was to tell him they were particularly engaged and could see no one. The next moment she saw there was something wrong. Hugh was evidently labouring under suppressed excitement of no ordinary kind. His face was paler

than usual, his brows were knit, and he had every appearance of suffering from some powerful and deep emotion. Mrs. Cherryfield had no idea that he had cherished hopes in regard to Cynthia which had now received their deathblow. She knew, of course, that he had hung about her daughter a good deal, and there certainly had been a little goodhumoured chaff at his expense in consequence; but there had never been any reason to suspect that he was seriously hard hit. No, there was unquestionably some other cause for his perturbation, and she immediately connected it with the letter he had just received from his absent guardian.

Hugh was either too obtuse or too much preoccupied to notice that he was *de trop*. He paid no attention to the presence of either Veryan or Miss Jorkaway, but turned abruptly to the Squire.

"I've had a letter from Sir Thomas," he said in rather a husky voice. "He wants me to tell you that they're coming back earlier than they expected, and will arrive by the 5.40 train to-morrow."

"Oh, indeed. Thanks," said the Squire absently. "I shall be glad to see them. I hope they're both quite well?"

Then it seemed to dawn on Hugh that something unusual was in progress, and he prepared to leave. As he stepped back, a hand was laid upon his arm. "No—stay!" a voice said in his ear. "You're wanted, though they don't know it." Hugh stared in blank astonishment as he saw that Virtue was the

speaker. Then the old woman advanced into the middle of the room, and paused.

"What is the meaning of all this?" cried Mrs. Cherryfield in an angry tone.

"That's just what I'm about to tell ye, ma'am," said Virtue very deliberately. "It ain't no secret, I believe, as that gentleman over there is in hopes of marrying Miss Cynthia?"

A dull pang went through the poor lady's heart. "Well, what then?" she retorted sharply. "I suppose everybody knows that now."

Virtue fixed her eyes on Veryan, but continued to address her mistress. "I want to return 'im something as 'e's lost," she said in a hard, clear voice. "It's some years since 'e dropped it, and I dessay 'e may have forgotten all about it; but 'e'll know it again when 'e sees it, I expect." And she laid a small coloured object on the Squire's table in full view of everybody in the room.

It was a round solitaire-stud for the wristband, enamelled in blue, with the letters A. C. T. arranged in a monogram in the centre. Veryan started violently, and gazed at it as though fascinated. The Squire and Mrs. Cherryfield looked as if they thought Virtue had suddenly gone mad, and Miss Jorkaway's eyes nearly bolted out of her head with interest and curiosity. A pause followed, during which a pin might have been heard to drop. Suddenly Hugh bounded forward with a shout.

"What, the devil!" he cried. "That's mine! Have you been ransacking my drawers?"

"No," said Virtue, wheeling round upon him. "It's been in my possession for eighteen year and more. *It's the fellow to the one you've got.*"

Hugh was too much befogged to answer. The others, having no clue to the old servant's extraordinary proceedings, held their breath and waited.

"I found that there stud in my daughter's bedroom eighteen year ago, and it belonged to the man as ruined her. He left it behind 'im with a few other bits o' rubbish when 'e ran away. His name was Thwaites, an' I've been looking for 'im ever since. I knew as I should find 'im some day, and now he stands before me."

She drew herself stiffly up, a hard, fierce glitter in her eyes. No one spoke; a terrible hush succeeded the withering sentences, and Mrs. Cherryfield looked as though ready to faint. Then, as by one consent, every eye was turned on Veryan. He was leaning with his back against the wall, his arms folded lightly across his chest. There was no perturbation noticeable in his bearing; there he stood, calm and grave, his face no longer radiant with sunny smiles, but impenetrable as a mask. At length a look of intelligence dawned in the angry, puzzled eyes of Hugh. A deep flush suffused his brow, and his hands clenched themselves involuntarily.

"It can't be!" he exclaimed. "You, the man *I*'m on the look-out for, too—the man I told you about myself, the man I've sworn to horsewhip? You—*my father?*"

"What was your mother's name?" said Veryan, looking up.

"Belinda," answered Hugh.

A look of semi-whimsical amazement came over Veryan's face. "Then I suppose I can't disown you," he rejoined. "But I thought you were dead and buried."

With a cry of rage Hugh rushed at him, striking blindly with his fists. Mrs. Cherryfield shrieked with horror, and the Squire rose in angry haste to interfere. But it was all over in a twinkling. No sooner did Hugh approach than Veryan grasped him by the wrists, and the next moment he felt an agonising and utterly disabling pain in the back of his right hand. Veryan flung him off with rather a scornful smile. "It was only my knuckle," he said, "nothing to hurt you. Come, man, control yourself."

"That ain't no sort o' use," said Virtue gravely. "His punishment's in other hands than yours."

"Who spoke to you?" snapped Hugh roughly.

"Be silent, Hugh," said Veryan, "and don't talk disrespectfully to your grandmother."

"My what?" he snarled, recoiling.

"Your mother was my child," said Virtue with an emotion she could not suppress. "I never knew no wrong of 'er afore she met that man. She was always a bit flighty, may be—too fond of having 'er own way; but in an evil hour he crossed 'er path, and from that moment she was lost to me. I soon found out her secret. It came near killing me, it did.

There was a dreadful scene—my God! for I'd never suspected 'er before. I was for castin' her off at first, may God forgive me—but I thought of 'er soul, and I saw there was a chance left. The man 'ad got to marry 'er, and she made 'im do it. But they never lived together, for he was young in years though old in sin, and besides 'e'd got no money, but was just dependent on 'is father. So the marriage was kep' secret, only Belinda she was made an honest woman. Then the boy was born"—here she turned her face towards Hugh—"and six months afterwards his father ran away. He went abroad, I think; I never 'eard no more of 'im. And then Belinda, she got restless. I never knew what it was come over 'er, but she'd stay out nights—I got that anxious there was no bearin' of it—and at last she took the child away with 'er and never came back no more. I managed to live through it, but it made an old woman of me afore my time. 'Twasn't till more 'n a year afterwards I 'eard as she was dead and that the child was gone."

"This is a very dreadful story," said the Squire after a long pause. "I ought to mention that in a recent interview Mr. Veryan informed me that he had married when quite young and that his wife had died. But of these shocking details he uttered not one word."

"There's something else he didn't tell you, Mr. Cherryfield," said Hugh, panting. "A man who first betrays a girl and then deserts his wife and

child don't stick at trifles, and my precious father, as he turns out to be, has been employing his leisure lately with a bit of burglary. Miss Jorkaway, you were right after all, though how the deuce you found it out beats *me*. It was he that planned that robbery at old Lord What's-his-name's in Monmouthshire."

"Good Lord deliver us!" gasped poor Mrs. Cherryfield, completely dazed by this fresh accusation. Miss Jorkaway was unable to suppress a start of genuine astonishment, but, quickly recovering herself, assumed an air of quiet though victorious complacency. The effect on Veryan was peculiar. He simply raised his eyebrows with a look of curiosity and interest, while a slight, inscrutable smile played upon his lips. To all appearance he was the most indifferent spectator present.

Hugh pulled a letter from his pocket. "I don't want you to read this aloud," he said, handing it to the Squire, "but it'll show you that I ain't speaking without book. Sir Thomas Crotchett, it seems, went to Monmouthshire about this very business, and I suppose he had his own reasons for not mentioning it to anyone—not even to the person principally concerned. That he'll no doubt explain when he comes back. But he says distinctly that my father was the man, and as this gentleman has now been good enough to own me as his son I don't think there's much room for doubt."

The Squire took the letter, and profound silence reigned while he was reading it. Mrs. Cherryfield

looked over his shoulder, though her agitation prevented her from following the writer very closely. But it was brief and to the point.

"Man of Ross Hotel,
"Monmouth, *June* 18.

"DEAR HUGH,—When you asked me, on my late departure, whether anything unpleasant had occurred, I replied, 'Nothing that need cause unpleasantness to you.' You probably did not understand the allusion, and it was scarcely possible you should. But reflection has altered my views, and I now write to prepare you for the fuller account which awaits you on our return.

"You have been brought up, for the best of reasons, in partial ignorance of your parentage. You were always aware, however, that your father behaved very badly to your mother, and I know that you cherished schemes of vengeance if ever he should cross your path. I will not now dwell upon this fact, which I have always deplored; it is, indeed, to let you know that all such intentions on your part have been rendered nugatory by recent events that I now write this letter. It is, in short, my painful duty to inform you that the man who planned the jewel-robbery at Camelot Towers was your unhappy father.

"It was a paragraph in the county paper that apprized me of this fact, of which there seems no doubt whatever. The evidence against him is over-

whelming, and a warrant has been issued for his arrest, which may take place at any moment, as his whereabouts are known. In fact, *he is at this very hour not a hundred miles from Cherryfield Hall itself*, and it was to try and arrange for his defence that I came here so hurriedly two days ago.

"I am coming back immediately to complete my story, and am weak enough to hope that in the meantime he may have heard the alarm and effected his escape. Be good enough to inform Mr. and Mrs. Cherryfield, with our united kind regards, that we hope to arrive by the 5.40 train the day after to-morrow.—Yours affectionately,

"THOMAS CROTCHETT."

The Squire's brow was wrinkled with perplexity as he replaced the letter in its envelope and gave it back to Hugh. "It is a strange affair," he said thoughtfully, "and I cannot see through it altogether." Then, turning to Veryan,—

"Mr. Veryan, you have heard the charges—the very dreadful charges—that have been brought against you. Nothing that I can say can add to their gravity, which must be as patent to you as to all of us. You are accused, on crushing evidence, of seduction, desertion, and burglary, and you appear to be living in my house under a false name. You are even now in danger of arrest. Have you nothing to say in your defence?"

"A gentleman scarcely defends himself at the expense of a dead woman," answered Veryan.

"The evasion is worthy of a seducer," retorted the Squire, hotly. "Is that positively all you have to say?"

"At present," said Veryan, with the same inscrutable smile.

"I can scarcely believe my ears!" exclaimed the Squire, with a bewildered motion of his hands. "You fail to grasp the situation, it seems to me. Do you seriously mean to tell me that you refuse to defend yourself against imputations that brand you as a rascal, and will probably land you in gaol?"

"When I am put upon my trial I may be compelled to adopt a different course," answered Veryan, "but till then it does not suit me to say more."

"When you are put upon your trial!" repeated the Squire. "Then you have made up your mind to be arrested?"

"If, as Sir Thomas seems to have told you, a warrant is out against me, my arrest will certainly follow," rejoined Veryan. "At least, that is usually the case."

The remark was so incontrovertible that Mr. Cherryfield was rather at a loss to reply. "You take the affair with extraordinary coolness," he observed a little helplessly.

"Evidently accustomed to being in positions of the same sort," muttered Miss Jorkaway to Hugh.

"At present it seems more enigmatical than terrifying," replied Veryan. "What has Sir Thomas Crotchett to do with it, may I ask?"

"Sir Thomas Crotchett, Sir, who has brought up your deserted son as his own, is interesting himself in your defence," answered the Squire sternly. "He is naturally unwilling that so terrible a stigma should devolve on Hugh as having a convicted felon for his father if it can be averted, and it is for his sake, I have no doubt, that he is exerting himself on your behalf. His action is most noble, and I trust you will at least acknowledge the debt of gratitude you owe him for it—that is, if you are really guilty, as I sadly fear you are."

"But it is Hugh he seeks to shield," said Veryan, "lest disgrace should fall on him through me. I really don't see why I should be grateful to him for that."

"He may spare himself the trouble as far as I'm concerned," put in Hugh. "My new-found father was kind enough to prove to me the other night that it was no disgrace to be the son of a scoundrel because you weren't consulted when you were born. I've laid the lesson to heart, and I don't care a farthing what becomes of him. Sir Thomas may do what he likes—it's nothing to me. I only know I wouldn't chuck away *my* money on him, that's all."

"Come, this is beside the mark," interrupted the Squire. "Mr. Thwaites, or Mr. Veryan, or what ever your name may be, I ask you for the last time —will you or will you not defend yourself against the charges laid at your door by Mrs. Sexton and Sir Thomas Crotchett?"

"I have already answered," replied Veryan.

"Then under those circumstances there is no more to say," exclaimed the Squire. "It is impossible that you can be arrested in my house, and the sooner you give yourself a chance of escape the better. Of course your engagement to my daughter is at an end."

"Pardon me," said Veryan. His composure had never failed him for an instant. "That is not quite the word. Let us say that my engagement to your daughter is in abeyance."

"Yes, oh yes! Not at an end," cried an imploring young voice in the doorway. A general look of consternation passed from face to face as Cynthia, pale and horror-stricken, stepped swiftly forward and stood by the side of Veryan. "Oh, I am sorry—but I have heard it all. I came to see where he was, and I heard it. Carr, tell me the truth! They are all against you—all except me. Carr, why won't you speak? Oh, you can't be wicked, as they say you are—I'll never, never believe it—it wasn't you, was it? It must have been some one else; oh, say that it wasn't you!"

"Cynthia, come away this moment!" exclaimed Mrs. Cherryfield, terribly annoyed. "How dare you demean yourself like that?"

"No, mother, my place is at his side," said the girl unfalteringly. "He is my promised husband. He has not said a word in his own defence, and you have no right to judge him. You mustn't ask me to give him up. He may go away, or you may part us for ever, and then we shall be separated. But he is all the world to me, and as long——"

"Oh, this is too shocking," cried Mrs. Cherryfield. "Cynthia, you don't know what you're saying. You've no business here at all. Reginald, speak to her! Tell her how unseemly her behaviour is. What, you know what he is accused of, and yet you touch his hand, you cling to him, you refuse to leave him? Things that are not fit for a girl to hear—oh, it is dreadful," ejaculated the outraged lady, with a burst of angry tears.

"My dear child, you must see yourself that what your mother says is true," said the Squire uneasily. "Try and command yourself, make an effort, for your own sake. We have no choice in the matter. It is imperative that after what we've heard your engagement with Mr.—Thwaites, if that is his name—should be broken off; there's nothing else to be done. And if it weren't for the dastardly character that he's now proved to be, I should wonder that the man himself had the miserable meanness to take advantage of your generosity."

"Forgive me for remarking, Sir," said Veryan, "that as Cynthia appears to be almost the only person present who has not taken temporary leave of her senses, it would be the height of ingratitude on my part——"

"You impertinent man!" exclaimed Mrs. Cherryfield. "O Reginald, he's taking her hand before our eyes. It is outrageous. Mr. Veryan, will you disprove these charges, or leave the house at once?"

"Madam," he answered very gravely, "I never bandy words. Nor do I remain in any house in

which I am unwelcome. I will only say one thing. The evidence you consider so crushing is full of the most glaring flaws. You could no more build a case upon such evidence than you could carry water in a sieve, and a lawyer could blow down your house of cards with a single breath. You have asked me to plead guilty or not guilty. I decline to do either the one or the other. As regards the accusations preferred against me by my eminently respectable but somewhat vindictive mother-in-law, I have already told you that my lips are sealed, and have given you as much indication of the reason as I consider necessary. As for the other affair——"

"Enough, enough!" interrupted the Squire. "We want no hairsplitting pettifogging lawyers to help you wriggle out of clear, plain issues that you are yourself unable or afraid to face. An innocent man doesn't appeal to lawyers, whose trade it is to prove black white; he grows indignant, Sir, he shows some generous anger at the injustice done him, he makes some attempt to disprove the slur thrown upon his manliness, his honour, his good name. I'd sooner see my daughter in her grave than married to a man who behaves as you are behaving now. If you are innocent, why don't you defend yourself, if only for her sake?"

Veryan turned to Cynthia. "Do you believe me guilty?"

"I'd sooner die than think so," she replied.

"That is sufficient," he rejoined. "Mr. Cherryfield, you have been good enough to remind me that

I stand in danger of arrest. Well, I have no particular wish to be arrested, and still less that anything of so unpleasant a nature should take place in your house; for I've been your guest, and you've been very kind to me. I shall therefore leave immediately, and at the same time I thank you, if you will accept my thanks, for all your hospitality. If we should ever meet again——"

"We are not likely to," said the Squire hastily. "You can scarcely avoid arrest; there's no mistaking Sir Thomas Crotchett's hint, and the sooner you're away the better. If I were in your place, I think I should give myself up; but that's your affair, not mine. I will only express a hope that the punishment which now awaits you may not be without some influence for good; that you will employ your hours in prison in repenting of your past crimes, especially towards that unhappy woman——"

"Father, you are cruel, horribly cruel!" cried Cynthia, her face flaming. "You want to hound him to his destruction, you have no pity, no mercy! It is so unlike you; and he—oh, I am sure that he is good! It is all some dreadful misunderstanding, I know it is. Arrested! Put in prison! And you talk of it like that. I think it will break my heart."

The Squire hesitated. He was a man who lived almost entirely in his books, and was unaccustomed to deal with the affairs of actual life; but he possessed strong passions, and the revulsion of feeling caused by the lurid light now thrown on Veryan's character was intensified by the exasperating coolness and

self-possession of the rogue himself, now standing so shamelessly at bay. It was the brazen assurance of the man that angered him, and blinded him for the time being to the heaviness of the blow against which Cynthia was fighting so gallantly. But her words recalled him to himself, and an awkward pause ensued.

"Reginald," said his wife, "we must not be hard upon her; I even less than you, for it is through me that all this wretchedness has come about. It is all my fault, as I confessed to you before. Come upstairs with me, Cynthia my child, and let me comfort you," moaned the poor woman, as she rose with difficulty from her seat.

"As long as he is here I stay with him; when you have driven him away neither you nor anyone can comfort me," said Cynthia.

"And I am going now," said Veryan, grasping her right hand in his left. "Cynthia, I shall never forget your conduct at this time, and you shall never have occasion to regret it. It will always be an additional bond, binding me to you. Mr. Cherryfield," he added, seeing that the Squire was preparing to explode in another burst of indignation at this vapouring address, "I entirely sympathise with your reluctance to become the father-in-law of a convicted burglar. And as you are so anxious for my arrest, I think I may as well inform you that it is my intention to go straight from here to the Cherryfield Arms, where anyone who has any business with me will find me. I mention this in case the police should

first come here to look for me by mistake. You will now be able to tell them exactly where I am."

"Your effrontery is not worth while resenting," said the Squire. "You will scarcely have time to pack all your boxes, I suppose, but I'll see that they're sent after you to the inn you name."

"Thank you very much," replied Veryan with a smile; "I don't quite like to ask a favour of you, but if you wouldn't mind giving them house-room till I send for them, you might spare yourself unnecessary trouble. Cynthia, I leave them in your care. There's my violin, you know——"

"I will not permit such unheard-of insolence to continue," interrupted the Squire, rising. "My daughter will have nothing to do with either you or your luggage, of that you may rest assured. From this moment you pass out of our lives for ever, and I only regret—most deeply and sorrowfully regret—that you ever came into them at all."

"A desperate man, in hourly expectation of arrest, and with nothing but penal servitude to look forward to, might surely claim some indulgence," replied the scamp, unruffled to the last. "If you, Sir, were by any unforeseen chain of circumstances to stand in the position I now occupy, I think I should treat you differently. I will say nothing more at present than that I wish you an agreeable interview with Sir Thomas Crotchett."

The next moment he was gone.

CHAPTER XXII.

ARRESTED.

It is not easy to imagine, and it is impossible adequately to describe, the terrible gloom that now fell on the inmates of Cherryfield Hall. The contrast between that fatal day and the joyous day that had preceded it was like nothing but an oppressive nightmare, against which one struggles vainly under the blighting consciousness that it will last for ever. Yet it was no dream, this sudden withdrawal of light, and gaiety and gladness, but cold hard reality—very bitter, very dreary, very real. Only a few hours before, the house had rung with congratulations; the sunshine within had rivalled the sunshine without, not a cloud threatened the beauty of the sky, the whole world had been like a paradise of pure content and happiness. Now all was changed. People went about instinctively with noiseless footsteps, those who were not in the secret being dimly conscious that some great sorrow had fallen on the family, and dimly speculating as to what it could possibly be. A lame story had been set afoot telling of sudden and some-

what disagreeable business that had demanded Mr. Veryan's immediate attention, and necessitated his taking a journey the duration of which was uncertain. This was the Squire's doing. Mrs. Cherryfield was invisible; Cynthia, no longer buoyed up by her lover's presence, had utterly broken down, and suffered no one to come near her; Miss Jorkaway only dropped mysterious hints, and looked unspeakably portentous. There have been many funeral feasts since time began which were as merry banquets compared with the dinner served as usual that night. The Squire was in his customary place, but it devolved on Nora to take the head of the table, to keep up a semblance of hollow cheerfulness, and do her utmost to preserve appearances. She, of course, had been taken into her parents' confidence, and her share of the burden consisted, outwardly at any rate, in the painful duty of attending to the guests and eluding their interrogative commiserations. She may have had an even heavier and more secret cross to bear—for more than one observer had noticed the girl's expression once or twice when Veryan and Cynthia were together; but if she had she gave no sign of it, and none of the congratulations showered upon her sister had been sweeter or more cordial than her own.

So Miss Jorkaway's schemes had prospered, and this was the result. It was true that all her theories had been shattered, and that the *coup-de-grâce* had come from other quarters altogether; but she did not dwell upon this view of the affair, contenting herself

rather with the complacent reflection that her powers of intuition must be little short of miraculous, and that it was she, after all, who had set the ball in motion. She had never dared to hope that her wild idea about the burglary would receive the wonderful confirmation which had actually sanctioned it, and the remembrance filled her with delight. There had been some rough places to go over, but assistance had come in the very nick of time, and—barring an insignificant detail or two—her case had been made good. On Veryan she was amply revenged, and to do her justice she had no particular wish that he should suffer more. His marriage with Cynthia was now of course impossible, and the family could scarcely overlook the fact that it was her diplomacy, her zeal, her marvellous gift of observation and resource to which they owed the child's escape from life-long union with a scoundrel. Of course dear Cynthia was suffering from the disappointment; that was but natural and unavoidable. But even that might redound to her own advantage, for what is a surer remedy for love-troubles than change of scene? A long, delightful tour through Switzerland to the Italian lakes would be the very thing for her, and she, Miss Jorkaway, with her vast experience of foreign parts, would be the best companion she could have. Miss Jorkaway made a mental note of this, and determined to drop a hint of it to Mrs. Cherryfield the first opportunity she got.

There are some persons, I believe, who take a

morbid pleasure in analysing the anguish of a girl. I am not one of them. There are seasons in the lives of all of us when friends and associates, hope, heaven, happiness and God Himself are blotted from our very consciousness, and our whole being is resolved into a sensation of pure agony, unrelieved and for the hour unrelievable. Why dwell upon such things? Cynthia was now passing through one of these ordeals, and there was no comfort for her. There never is. Words cannot roll back the clouds that gather thick and threatening over our Valleys of Humiliation. We have to stumble onwards in the dark until we reach the end, be that near or distant. And the pain of Cynthia was intensified by doubts which racked her. If Veryan were not the angel of light that she had deemed him: if there were any truth in those foul charges he would not rebut: if he were brought to trial, convicted, sentenced—then she only wished that she might die. Oh, what was the truth about it all? How could she bear this anguish of suspense? His arrest might take place any moment; he might be even then in prison. And only a few hours had passed since her head was lying on his breast.

Night came at length, but brought no rest or comfort. It was nearly five o'clock when, exhausted by emotion, the girl sank into a dreamless sleep which lasted till nearly nine. Who does not know what it is to wake in the morning with a sense of some crushing burden or heavy sorrow, the exact

nature of which does not recur to us at once, and then suddenly resumes its shape? That was Cynthia's experience; that bitter moment we all know so well. But the new morning brought, if not hope, a slight access of energy. Cynthia no longer felt prostrate. On the contrary, she was conscious of a certain restlessness, an urgent desire to do something definite and practical, mingled with intense anxiety to know what had occurred to Veryan since he left. For a moment she was devoured with eagerness to go to the inn where he was staying and see him for herself. Why should she not? He was known in the village as having been her father's guest, and the news of their engagement had probably leaked out too. But her courage failed. She told herself that Veryan might not like it.

Towards noon she summoned sufficient resolution to steal downstairs, hoping she would meet no one. Dying to know whether anything had been heard of Veryan's arrest, she determined to go into the morning-room and ask her mother. But Mrs. Cherryfield was not there, and the house seemed almost empty. Then she wandered slowly across the hall, and stood for a moment looking out into the garden. The sun was shining garishly, and the gaiety of the flowerbeds, bright with crimson and purple and yellow and blue, mocked her misery. Loneliness became abhorrent to her; she longed to talk to somebody who would comfort and encourage her, and suggest some practical device. Nora! Yes, she would go to Nora. Only Nora, now, could give her any solace.

As she turned, she unexpectedly came full upon Hugh Crotchett. "His son!" she thought with a sickening qualm. At that moment she herself revolted against the idea of marrying the man who had begotten such a graceless cub. Why, of the two it seemed to her that Hugh looked almost the older—he was so coarse, so hairy, and so lumpish. "What a creature the mother must have been!" she murmured to herself. Hugh fell back as he saw her. Then he remembered that it was incumbent upon him to offer her his sympathy. "I'm awfully sorry it has turned out like this," he said putting his hands in his coat pockets. "I hope you don't blame me in any way. It wasn't my fault, I swear—of course, you know, it couldn't be, for a fellow don't choose his father. You mustn't take on too much, and you'll get over it in time."

Cynthia bowed her head, and attempted to escape. Hugh continued: "Besides, you ain't the only one, you know. There's me, you must remember. Tain't so pleasant to find out that that grim old nurse o' yours is my own grandmother, I can tell you. It was she as ferreted the whole thing out—she and the Jorkaway together. I say—you ain't savage with me for saying this, are you? Well, I'm blest if I say a civil thing again to a girl as long as ever I live!"

For Cynthia had flown, unable to bear another word. A new idea now occurred to her. Instead of going into Nora's room she went straight back to her own, and rang the bell. If she dared not go to

the village herself, she could send some one else, and discover if anything had happened by that means.

"Send Kezia to me," she said when the servant came.

In a few minutes Miss Pottleberry appeared. "Kezia," said Cynthia, taking a scrap of ribbon from one of her drawers, "I want you to step down to Debenham's and match this for me. If you can't get the exact shade, never mind. If you can, buy me six yards of it. There's half-a-crown. Do you understand?"

"Yes, miss," replied the girl.

"You must go at once," added Cynthia.

"Very well, miss," said Kezia. "Is there anything else?"

Cynthia hesitated. "Yes," she said desperately at last. How was she to put it? A painful blush mounted to her brow, and she bit her lips nervously. "If you should hear any particular news in the village——" she said. "I'm told there's been a robbery somewhere, and—and—we're rather interested in it. We know something of the gentleman who has been robbed, and it's said that the police are looking for the thief in Cherryfield. They may have heard something about it in the village. If you *should* hear anything——"

"I've got quick ears, miss," said Kezia, her eyes twinkling. "I'm no gossip, not I, but if there's anything in the wind I'm pretty sure to pick it up. Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all," said Cynthia. "Stop—you pass the Cherryfield Arms, don't you? Of course I don't want you to go in, but if the landlady happened to be standing outside, you know—she's a friend of yours, isn't she? They might know something at the inn. There, never mind—only——"

"I'll find out everything that's going, miss," replied Kezia with something like a wink. "There's nothing more, is there?"

"No, no, nothing," said Cynthia in an agony of shame not untempered with anticipation. "Come, off with you, and be back as soon as you can. Remember—if you can't get the exact shade, it doesn't matter. I dare say Debenham hasn't got it after all."

Kezia promptly disappeared, and Cynthia rushed off to Nora's room. The two girls fondled and caressed each other as girls are said to do, and at half-past one they had a little tray of lunch brought up, which certainly did them both good. Then they cried a little and talked to their hearts' content, wondering what Veryan was doing, and what the truth of it all was, and how much more they would learn when Sir Thomas Crotchett came back; till Cynthia, looking at her watch, found that it was twenty minutes to three and time she returned to her own room to receive Kezia's report.

"Well?" said Cynthia, trembling, when the girl came in.

Kezia's story was soon told. She had got the ribbon, and matched the sample exactly. She had

heard nothing of any robbery, and no one seemed to know anything at all about it. And she had passed the Cherryfield Arms, and seen—and seen Mr. Veryan sitting in the front garden with a cigarette, looking as calm and unconcerned as ever!

"Did he see you?" asked Cynthia breathlessly.

"No, miss," replied Kezia. "He was staring up at the sky, and watching the little rings of smoke come one after another out of his mouth."

Then he was safe so far. Cynthia fetched a deep breath of relief as she dismissed Kezia. But what, she wondered, could induce him to expose himself so imprudently, and run such frightful risks? He had been warned that his whereabouts were known and that a warrant was out against him, he knew that his arrest was certain, and yet he seemed to take a pleasure in defying destiny. Well, she at any rate was helpless, and there was nothing for it but to wait, and hope, and wonder.

Mrs. Cherryfield came in shortly after three o'clock, unable to endure Cynthia's absence any longer. The girl had stubbornly refused to see her mother ever since Veryan had been driven off. She said she was strong enough to bear her burden alone, but that condolences were too much for her. And now, when Mrs. Cherryfield sought her in her own room, she declined all reference to the subject. The unhappy lady wept, and overwhelmed herself with reproaches for the imprudence that had led to all the trouble; Cynthia simply replied that what

was done was done, and peremptorily bade her mother be silent when she began to expatiate upon the blessing in disguise vouchsafed to them in the timely exposure of Veryan. Mothers are given to these obtusenesses at times. And then there came a pause.

"Poor old Virtue is so anxious to see you," said Mrs. Cherryfield at last.

"I will not see her," answered Cynthia.

"She is not to blame," urged Mrs. Cherryfield. "Just think of what she must have gone though. Think of all these years, so full of suffering and grief. And how good she has always been to you! She has been a second mother to you, Cynthia. Why should you treat her like an enemy?"

"She is my enemy," said Cynthia sternly. "This is her hour of triumph, and she is no doubt enjoying it. It is my hour of misery and humiliation. Let her exult alone. She shall not come here to do it."

Mrs. Cherryfield did not stay much longer. In Cynthia's present mood nothing that she could say would have the slightest weight with her, and she could only trust that time would bring about the cure. On her way downstairs she met the governess going up.

"How is dear Cynthia?" asked Miss Jorkaway sympathetically.

"We can scarcely expect her to be very lively," replied Mrs. Cherryfield with averted eyes.

"Of course it's all terribly sad," continued the

other, "but it was inevitable. Things like this always do leak out, you know, sooner or later. I think I never performed a more cruelly painful duty in all my life. Dear Cynthia!"

"You didn't seem to suffer much in doing it," retorted Mrs. Cherryfield with a look that was not pleasant to the governess. "I do not even yet quite understand what interest you had in the affair. And I must candidly tell you, Miss Jorkaway," added her employer, "that there is nothing I detest so much as anything like secret domestic intrigues, such as you appear to have been carrying on in this house. But we will talk of all this later."

Mrs. Cherryfield passed on, leaving Miss Jorkaway transfixed. So far from being overwhelmed with gratitude for her inestimable services, she was actually repudiated and threatened! It was incredible; nay, it was worse than incredible, it justified her in entertaining the gravest possible apprehensions about her future. "Oh, the thanklessness of this wretched world!" groaned the governess under her breath. The delightful trip to Switzerland and the Italian lakes looked very far off now, and Miss Jorkaway shuddered as a vision of grimy boarding-houses, populated by impecunious widows, snuff-taking old bachelors, and tenth-rate people generally, rose before her mind. The contrast was not agreeable. Were her intrigues to bring about the very misfortune it had been their main object to prevent?

By this time most people in the house knew some-

thing of what had occurred, although the versions extant did not always harmonise. It is only fair to say that while one and all were deeply grieved at the disaster that had befallen Cynthia, the general feeling about Veryan was one of perplexity rather than indignation. The details of the affair were somewhat indistinct, and, as Miss Walker pointed out, no cross-examination of the witnesses had been so much as thought of. Mrs. St. Paul, with a gentle sigh, expressed an opinion that if only the poor dear child had been brought up in an atmosphere of acquiescence-in-things-as-they-were-and-as-they-might-be-any-day, the indifference thus engendered would have stood her in good stead now. The doctor turned upon her with a snort. "I should advise ye not to worry her with such fads yet awhile, ma'am," said old Tabernacle rather sharply. "They may be all very well for old folks like you and me to amuse ourselves with, but ye can't blame Cynthia for not 'acquiescing' in a blow like yon."

Meanwhile Cynthia had thrown herself upon a couch, wearied with anxiety and grief. Her eyes closed, and gradually she sank into a light sleep which afforded her a temporary respite. Then she began to dream. She thought that Veryan was with her as before, and that they were wandering through a forest hand-in-hand. But there was something strange about him. Do what she would, she could never see his face. Sometimes he seemed to get behind her, and sometimes he would turn his head

away; and then a disagreeable voice whispered in her ear that it was not Veryan she was with, but someone else, and that was the cause of his keeping his face hidden. So she told him in her dream that he must bend down and kiss her, for then she would be able to see whether the voice spoke truth or falsehood. And the man whose hand she held replied that he would never kiss her till she had full faith that it was he and no one else; the faith must earn the kiss, it was not for the kiss to give conviction. Then, before she could say more, a terrific clap of thunder broke over both their heads, and her dream ended.

It was the banging of the front door. Cynthia sprang up and went out into the passage to listen. Sir Thomas and Lady Crotchett had returned; she could hear the grinding of the carriage-wheels upon the gravel as the fly-horse backed and fidgeted while the servant handed out their traps. She went down a few more steps, and, leaning over the balustrade, was able to see and hear. She saw Lady Crotchett enter the morning-room, where Mrs. Cherryfield had ordered tea for her; and she heard the two brief sentences that passed between Sir Thomas and his ward.

"I got your letter," said Hugh. "What's become of him?"

"He was arrested this afternoon," replied Sir Thomas.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SIR THOMAS'S CONFESSION.

SQUIRE CHERRYFIELD was, as we have seen, a very absent-minded man, whose interest in everyday affairs was generally of the very vaguest sort; but it is characteristic of such persons, I have noticed, to be peculiarly susceptible to dominant ideas, so that when any special subject attains the upper hand they are completely mastered by it for the time. That this was the case just now with Mr. Cherryfield will surprise no one; the unparalleled discoveries that had been made drove all other matters entirely out of his head, and he could think and talk of nothing in the world but Veryan. The return of Sir Thomas Crotchett, therefore, who held the key to the whole mystery, excited him beyond measure, and, eager for the fuller information promised in his letter to Hugh, he insisted upon the astonished baronet following him into his study before he had got through his second cup of tea.

"Crotchett," said the Squire, as soon as the door

was shut upon the three of them, "occurrences have taken place here since you went away which, as I am sure you will eventually acknowledge, justify me in the appeal I am about to make. I'll tell you all about them in good time, but just at present you must please humour me. Facts first, explanations afterwards. And the first thing I have to say is that Hugh has communicated to me, in confidence, the contents of your letter to him yesterday."

"Indeed?" said the baronet, turning towards Hugh with an air of considerable surprise. "I was scarcely prepared for that. The singularly painful nature of my communication——"

"Yes, yes, I know," interrupted the Squire. "But in my opinion he was fully justified by circumstances. Indeed, you may take it from me that he could scarcely have done otherwise. Now——"

"If that is your deliberate opinion, based upon circumstances of which I am myself quite ignorant, I must be satisfied," replied the baronet. "I need not say that I place an amount of reliance upon your mature judgment which I should certainly not accord to Hugh's alone."

"Very well, then," went on the Squire. "Now I want to ask you one preliminary question. Has the person referred to in that letter been arrested, or is he still at large?"

"He is now in custody," replied Sir Thomas.

"Ah!" exclaimed the Squire, drawing a deep breath. "Yes, I suppose it was inevitable, but it's a

sad affair—a terribly sad affair. Well, now I am going to ask you, with Hugh's full permission——"

At this moment Mrs. Cherryfield, having seen Lady Crotchett safely upstairs, entered the room and took her seat noiselessly near the Squire.

"—— with Hugh's full permission," resumed her husband, "if you will be good enough to include my wife and me in those more detailed statements promised in your letter respecting the circumstances of his birth. The request may appear a strange one, but I will justify it afterwards. We have a deeper interest in the affair than you can guess, and for our sakes—for the sake of the whole family—I entreat you to grant our request."

Sir Thomas was both surprised and puzzled. He could think of no explanation of the enigma but that Hugh must have proposed to Cynthia, and the revelation of his parentage would naturally, he saw at once, prove a serious obstacle to the alliance. This possibility had a disturbing effect upon the estimable baronet, who, to tell the truth, had sometimes suspected Hugh of a *tendresse* for the girl, and dreaded it for that very reason. He knit his brows for a few moments, and cleared his throat twice or thrice irresolutely. At last he said,—

"Your request, my dear Cherryfield, I must confess, comes upon me as a shock, and to grant it is impossible save at the expense of no small personal humiliation. But if, as you assure me, Hugh himself is a party to it, I scarcely see how I can refuse."

"Let's have it all," put in Hugh doggedly.

Sir Thomas's distress was so painfully apparent that Mrs. Cherryfield, struck with a sudden thought, came to the rescue. "Let me first place you in possession of a fact that I expect will make your task a little easier, dear Sir Thomas," she interposed. "We have just discovered that Hugh's maternal grandmother is living under this very roof."

"Under this very roof!" cried the astounded baronet.

"And has been for eighteen years," the Squire added. "We allude to that nurse of Cynthia's, old Virtue Sexton. An excellent creature, whom we all esteem most highly. You've noticed her, no doubt."

"This is extraordinary indeed," exclaimed the other. "I have certainly seen the person you refer to—an elderly woman, of somewhat austere appearance. And she is Belinda's mother! It is inconceivable. I see, now, that it is imperative I should narrate everything. Without hearing a word more, I acknowledge that the time for concealment has gone by."

Sir Thomas passed his handkerchief across his forehead, greatly agitated. There could be no doubt that it was a severe trial to him to continue, for he was a man of unusual sensitiveness in spite of his pompous airs, and the effort he was about to make was a very painful one. But, once convinced of its necessity, he showed no signs of flinching.

"At the time when these most lamentable occurrences took place," he began, "the unfortunate man

whose evil conduct we have now to consider was employed in the capacity of clerk to a firm of City stockbrokers. His tastes, I am sorry to say, were of a somewhat questionable order, and at an early period of his career he fell a victim to the seductions of the turf. In other words he contracted a habit of betting, and that led him into company which—a—which was not calculated either to improve his morals or further his career in life. I have often observed that a predilection for gambling, even on a moderate scale, is a snare in which the higher faculties are apt to get seriously enmeshed, the result too often being their gradual though inevitable extinction. This was unhappily the case with the young man of whom I am now telling you. He got deeply into debt, and debt soon landed him in crime.

"It appears that while he was engaged in the business of which I have spoken, it was his custom to frequent a certain luncheon-bar of no very high order, much patronised by City clerks. There he met a young woman employed in the capacity of barmaid, to whom he made advances. Now I have always thought," remarked Sir Thomas incidentally, "that women should be differently judged from men. And for this reason. The constitutional divergences between the sexes are so great that it is by no means easy to argue from one to the other, and men, having no subjective experience of the idiosyncrasies of women, are not in a position to weigh their motives fairly. I lay stress on this point, in order to soften,

as far as possible, any adverse judgment that you may form respecting the young person who now comes upon the scene. I shall confine myself to a bare assertion of facts, and leave all comments upon them to your charity.

"To cut an unpleasant story as short as possible," continued the baronet with a little grating cough, "the rough courtesies of the luncheon-bar led to intimacy, and intimacy to a temporary alliance. This, I am concerned to say, lasted for two or three years —allowing for an interval I am about to mention— and during all this time the unfortunate young man ran deeper and deeper into debt. I am now anticipating events, but I will resume the thread of the narrative directly. Suffice it to say that the debts were of the sort known as debts of honour, having been contracted upon the turf. He also gambled privately upon the Stock Exchange, and was soon in a desperate plight. To save himself he did the very worst, the most absolutely fatal, thing a man in his position could do; he embezzled the money of his employers. Detection followed, and the end of that episode in his career was that he was sentenced to penal servitude for five years."

"A pretty rascal we seem to have been harbouring!" muttered the Squire inaudibly. Hugh remained totally unmoved, while Mrs. Cherryfield emitted a little groan.

"I now revert to the time when he was still with the London stockbrokers, and in doing so approach

the most sordid part of the whole story," resumed Sir Thomas. "Money grew short with both of them, and painful scenes occurred. Then the time drew near when Belinda would be compelled to leave her situation from a cause that you may guess, and it became necessary that something should be done. The man was, as you will see, entirely devoid of honour, and had, moreover, begun to tire of his mistress. He neglected her more and more, and eventually abandoned her altogether. She found herself, in fact, compelled to seek other protection, and in her great extremity determined upon a step which, for the credit of humanity, I am almost ashamed to mention. It was nothing less than that she should take advantage of the infatuation of some one or other among her numerous admirers, and inveigle him into marrying her.

"The scheme prospered. She fixed upon a young lad who had for some time been under her pernicious influence, but of whom she knew nothing save that he was said to be the son of a rich man. It was believed, too, that she had a sort of low fondness for him, and this made it easier for her to carry out her design. He seems to have been like wax in her hands, and nothing was necessary but a certain amount of cajolery and undue complaisance to render him, as he imagined, deeply and irrevocably in love. Of course full allowance must be made for the situation in which she found herself, but it is difficult to excuse the remorseless cruelty she practised upon her victim.

"Well, after a brief struggle, she succeeded. The unhappy lad was eventually induced by threats, by tears, and by appeals to his honour, to marry her. And the same infatuation, coupled with his ignorance and inexperience of life, allowed him to be persuaded that the child born three months afterwards was his own. In fact, he was never permitted to doubt it for a moment, for she was clever in her way. His weakness and almost inconceivable folly in all this cannot be denied, but his conduct throughout, I have always considered, reflected no small honour on him. He was the dupe of his own highmindedness.

"But now, once safe, Belinda overreached herself, and her demeanour soon gave rise to suspicions even on the part of her unsophisticated husband. In fine, he was not long in discovering that she had another string to her bow, and had been playing him false for months with the very man who had before deserted her. On one occasion she went so far as to strike him, and, in a moment of passion, avowed her infidelity without a blush. Then his eyes were opened, and he left her for ever. An appointment being offered him abroad he accepted it, and from that moment never saw her face again; but I happen to know that he left instructions with a firm of respectable solicitors to see that she did not starve, arranging for the remittance of as much as he could afford out of his not very ample salary to support the child he had acknowledged and still regarded as his own."

Sir Thomas paused. His hearers were listening

breathlessly, and for a moment no one spoke. At last the Squire said—

"And how did you find all this out?"

"The man whom I have told you of was my own half-brother," answered Sir Thomas, deeply moved, "and it was on his account I took charge of Hugh when the mother died. He had meanwhile been convicted of embezzlement, and was then in prison. Since his liberation he has been plunging from crime to crime. At the present moment, as you know, he is under arrest upon a charge of burglary."

A red flush mounted to the Squire's brow, and his heart beat short and quick. "And his name?" he asked, clutching the arms of his chair.

"His name is Ezra Suppletongue," replied the baronet, "and the name of the dupe was Thwaites.'

"Good God!" exclaimed the Squire, falling backward.

"What!" shrieked Mrs. Cherryfield, starting up "Then Mr. Veryan is innocent!"

"Mr. Veryan?" repeated Sir Thomas. "Pray what has Mr. Veryan to do with it?"

"I shall die of shame," cried Mrs. Cherryfield. "Oh, Sir Thomas, I don't know how to tell you. It has all been a most horrible misunderstanding. And now we've driven him from the house, and—and——"

"Driven Veryan from the house?" echoed the baronet with open eyes. "What is all this about?"

"In plain words, my dear Crotchett, your return

at this moment proves of inestimable importance," said the Squire, recovering himself. "I promised you an explanation of my request, and here it is, as briefly as I can put it. Veryan is no other than young Thwaites. The change of name I don't yet understand, but we shall hear all about that later, let us hope. Yes, Veryan is Thwaites, and we've been attributing to him some, at any rate, of the villainies of Mr. Suppletongue. The old woman, Virtue—I suppose you never happened to hear her surname—somehow discovered a clue to his identity. It seems that he had a book with the name of Thwaites upon the fly-leaf, and she accused him of having been the man who led her daughter astray nineteen years ago. That of course made him Hugh's father, which he did not deny, and then came your letter announcing that it was Hugh's father who had planned the robbery at that place in Monmouthshire. We asked him for explanations, but he refused most stubbornly to say a word, so there was nothing for it——"

"No, no! he did say something," interrupted Mrs. Cherryfield. "He refused to defend himself at the expense of a dead woman. And we thought it was a miserable evasion!"

"Ay—I remember," groaned the Squire. "So he did. And only two days before we had given our consent to his engagement with Cynthia. Now you see where the trouble lies. We are altogether in a most horribly awkward predicament. My dear,

I can't help thinking that we've been a great deal too precipitate. But what I can do to make amends I will. I'll be off to the inn at once, and if the remaining points are only satisfactorily cleared up——"

"And I'll go to Cynthia," added Mrs. Cherryfield, rising eagerly. "The poor child's distress for the last four-and-twenty hours has been something pitiable to see."

"Then congratulate her please, from both of us, on her engagement to a remarkably fine fellow," said Sir Thomas Crotchett.

"My mother always gave me to understand that Thwaites was my father," said Hugh, who looked as though gradually waking up from a state of coma.

"For obvious reasons, I am afraid," remarked Sir Thomas dryly.

"Then is my name Suppletongue?" asked Hugh.

"It is not," was the significant reply. "You will continue to bear the name of Crotchett, as you have done hitherto."

"Where's my hat?" cried the Squire, bustling about. "Hugh, you must come with me, you know. We both owe Veryan all the apologies we can put together. By the way, old Virtue must be undeceived immediately. I've half a mind to take Miss Jorkaway and make her eat humble-pie too, only I'm afraid she'd enjoy the excitement of it. That woman would extract mysteries out of——"

"She shall do her mystery-mongering elsewhere

in future," interrupted Mrs. Cherryfield sternly. "She leaves this house to-morrow."

"And how about Virtue?" asked the Squire.

"We cannot turn her out," replied his wife. "There was more excuse for her. But there, go down to the inn at once, and bring Mr. Veryan back with you if you can possibly persuade him to come. I shall not have a moment's peace till I have humbled myself in the dust before him. Oh, what a noodle that man must have been when he was a boy! I think we'll put off dinner until eight, in case he's magnanimous, so as to give him time."

"Now, Hugh," said the Squire, "we must put our best foot forward. It's half-past six already."

"Cynthia! Cynthia!" cried Mrs. Cherryfield, bursting into her daughter's room. The girl was lying, in tearless agony, upon the bed. She took no notice of her mother's entrance, not even turning her head as she approached. "Sir Thomas has come back, and made the whole thing clear," continued the excited lady, breathlessly. "Cynthia, my own dear child, look up, and listen to the wonderful and splendid news I've come to tell you!"

* * * * *

The Cherryfield Arms was a rather stuffy, but outwardly not unpleasing, country inn, where accommodation for man and beast could be had on moderate terms, and beer, wine, and spirits were licensed to be drunk on the premises. It was scarcely a place that one would choose for a prolonged sojourn, and

no artist had ever thought it worth while transferring to his canvas; still, it was tolerably clean, the landlady was a civil woman, and it was possible to remain there for a day or two without incurring any serious risks of a death from boredom or an attack of acute dyspepsia—which is more than can be predicated of some. Its only attraction lay in the possession of a good-sized, old-fashioned, pleasant garden at the back, and it was here that Veryan had spent most of his time, occupied with books and pipes, since his expulsion from the Hall.

He had ordered his dinner to be ready at half-past seven, and was now sitting under an old apple-tree upon the grass-plot reading a London newspaper. The Squire, flustered and nervous, caught sight of him from the back doorway. "I hope he'll make it easy for me," muttered the unlucky gentleman, wiping his hot forehead, before Veryan had observed his presence. At that moment Hugh happened to make a grating noise upon the doorstep with his boots, thereby attracting Veryan's attention. He looked up, and rose promptly to his feet.

"Mr. Veryan," began the Squire as he advanced, feeling mortally uncomfortable, "you are probably a good deal surprised to see me here this evening."

"Not in the least," replied Veryan courteously, as he dragged forward a couple of garden chairs. "I thought you were a little premature, you know, in saying we should never meet again, though I scarcely expected you so soon. Won't you take a seat?"

"I don't half like to, and that's the fact," said the Squire, with rather a foolish face. "The truth is, Veryan, that I made a most astounding fool of myself yesterday afternoon, and if I have a grudge against you at all it is because you might have prevented it and didn't. Why in all the world did you refuse to say a word?"

"Pardon me for not replying to you at once," returned Veryan. "Come, Hugh, sit down, man. We can't help being father and son, you know.—Let me first ask *you* a question, Mr. Cherryfield. What is it that has brought about this rather sudden change of attitude on your part?"

"Well, you see," answered the Squire, "that I've been having a talk with Sir Thomas Crotchett, and I'm bound to say that he has thrown a very unexpected light upon the whole business. He knows all about your story, and now I know all about it too. You were guilty, when a youth, of what I should call a most unpardonable piece of folly, and you suffered for it. But it's not for me to blame you—why, we've all been fools in our day, and we only learn wisdom by paying pretty dearly for our experience. Now why couldn't you have given us a hint of the truth about all this yesterday?"

"My dear Sir, is it possible that you don't see?" said Veryan quietly. "Just think a moment. You accused me, on the strength of an ambiguous letter from Sir Thomas, of having been concerned in the robbery at Camelot Towers. I saw at a glance that

you were on the wrong scent, and that Sir Thomas was not referring to me at all. I also knew that he was coming back to-day, and that, immediately after his arrival, that misconception, at any rate, would be dispelled. Supposing I had simply denied my complicity, would you have believed me? Of course you wouldn't, and I should not have benefited my case in the very smallest degree by attempting to refute the charge. I preferred to leave that to Sir Thomas Crotchett, and you see my calculation was correct."

"But he identified the robber with Hugh's father," replied the Squire, "and as you had just acknowledged Hugh as your son, how could you possibly imagine that Sir Thomas was referring to some one else?"

"That point did not escape me, but I was perfectly willing to throw upon Sir Thomas the onus of clearing it up," said Veryan with a smile. "I suppose he has already confessed that he was mistaken there."

"Don't make too sure of that," said the Squire with a curious look. "But before we go any further I want to offer you all the apologies that one man can offer another to whom he has done a cruel and insulting wrong. My wife joins me in this, and won't be satisfied until she has told you so in person. I retract every injurious word I uttered yesterday, and can only hope that you'll be magnanimous enough to forget it, if you can, from this moment."

"Thank you very much," said Veryan simply. "We are once more friends. As for Hugh," he added with a humorous glance, "I fear that I have sinned against him past forgiveness. He'll never overlook the fact that I'm his father, though he might think less hardly of me if he knew all the truth. By the way, I must now turn to you for enlightenment. What has Sir Thomas to do with all that wretched business, and how came he ever to take up Hugh?"

"Ah, your delicacy was misplaced in refusing to speak of that affair," replied Mr. Cherryfield. "I've something to tell you, now, that will come as a great surprise to you, I think. Had you only defended yourself——"

"But there again I was sure that Sir Thomas must be in possession of the most important facts," interposed Veryan, "for he would scarcely have adopted Hugh without knowing a good deal about his early history."

"Ay, and he knows more than you do," returned the Squire, nodding. "Can you bear a bit of unexpected news? Hugh is no son of yours. He was palmed off——"

"Hugh—not my son?" exclaimed Veryan, astonished beyond measure. "Then who is he? What has become of the child I left when I went abroad?"

"There he sits," said the Squire. "But he's no more yours than mine. You were horribly cheated in that business, Veryan."

"Whose is he, then?" asked Veryan, leaning forward, and speaking in a low, concentrated tone which betrayed his deep excitement.

"His father was one Ezra Suppletongue. Do you know the name?" answered Mr. Cherryfield, regarding him with earnest scrutiny.

"Suppletongue!" cried Veryan, bringing his hand down with considerable force upon his knee. "I might have guessed it! I have good reason for remembering that man. So it was his child I fathered. It was he——"

"It was he who committed the robbery at Camelot Towers," put in the Squire, "and he is the half-brother, the very undesirable and inconvenient half-brother, of our friend Sir Thomas Crotchett."

Veryan was not easily taken aback, but this came upon him like a thunder-clap. "So that's the secret of it all," he murmured. "It's difficult to take it in at once. Why, Hugh, my lad, we shall be good friends again, I hope, now that you've no more cause to bear a grudge against me?"

"I always said you were a good sort," said Hugh, "and I'm an infernal fool. But I'll horsewhip that other fellow yet, if I get the chance."

"Of course you're still Virtue Sexton's son-in-law, you know," remarked the Squire, pulling a wry face. "You can't get out of that, I am afraid."

"Well, it can't be helped," acknowledged Veryan. "There are worse mothers-in-law than she, I fancy, and I shall fascinate her yet, never fear. I never saw

her in those old days, though I used to hear of her a good deal. I think she must be an interesting woman. That governess of yours, too, seems rather a remarkable character," he added, emitting a stream of thin blue smoke from a cigarette he had just lighted. "Her behaviour the other morning when I walked with her to the village was absolutely unaccountable."

"I've never taken much notice of the baggage," replied the Squire; "she doesn't interest me, I'm ashamed to say. She ought to, for she's a most abnormal person altogether. I should think she'd repay study. By the way, though, that reminds me —I knew I had something else to ask you. What is your real name? Is it Veryan or Thwaites?"

Veryan laughed. "Oh, that's very easily explained," he said. "My father's name was Thwaites, and so was mine—at first. Soon after I went abroad he died, leaving the bulk of his estate between my mother and my sister. The fact is, he and I never got on particularly well together, for he held very peculiar religious views, and always regarded me as a born reprobate. Then my sister married a sort of missionary and went out to South Africa, where she is now, devoting herself to the education of small Zulus. We correspond occasionally, but I have not seen her since. When I was five-and-twenty my mother came into a comfortable fortune through the death of an uncle, and this she eventually left to me, together with half the sum bequeathed to her by my father. She always considered that he

had treated me unfairly in cutting me off with a thousand pounds, and as my sister was amply provided for she thought she was only doing what was just in making me her legatee in full. I therefore dropped my patronymic, and assumed my mother's maiden name of Veryan. I've always thought that a man has very much the same right to his mother's name as to his father's."

"Was your mother's a Cornish family?" asked the Squire.

"Yes," said Veryan. "That is how I came to know Lord Llwydiarth, who takes his 'Tintagel' from some old ramshackle barn—formerly a castle, I believe—which still stands on the north coast of Cornwall. My mother's father was the clergyman there, and the families got intimate with each other during his incumbency."

"Well, I think you were quite right," remarked the Squire. "Veryan is a much better name than Thwaites, and I'm glad you changed it. But now—we haven't got much time, you know. Bless me, it's twenty minutes to eight! Veryan, you must come back with us, you must indeed. I'm afraid I've no right to ask you, beyond the right you yourself have given me in consenting to overlook what happened yesterday. But you'll not refuse, I hope?"

Veryan hesitated and coloured. "Don't you think we'd better wait a day or two?" he said.

"Would that make it any easier?" said the Squire, fidgeting.

"I think so," replied Veryan. "There might be a shade of awkwardness, you know, if I came back so soon. Let us get accustomed to the situation first. I'm sure that would be the better plan."

"But my wife!" cried the Squire. "She says she won't have a moment's rest till she has made her peace with you. You've no idea what a state of mind she's in. And, to be quite frank, she's put off dinner until eight, in hopes that you'll be magnanimous enough to return with us. Of course I don't like to urge you against your will, but that's the condition of affairs."

Veryan paused a moment or two. "It's difficult to refuse," he said slowly, "but still——"

"And think of Cynthia!" added Mr. Cherryfield. "She has stuck to you all through, and yet she's been suffering dreadfully. I haven't seen her myself, even, since yesterday afternoon. Think what it would be to her to have you sitting next her at dinner-time this evening—all trouble and anxiety at an end, after everything she's been undergoing. For her sake and in her name, I entreat you to come back with us at once."

"You are right," said Veryan rising. "For Cynthia's sake I'll come."

And he went. We need not dwell upon the cordial greeting he received from Sir Thomas and Lady Crotchett, the excellent feeling displayed by the other guests, and the full, hearty, even affectionate re-

conciliation which took place between him and his impulsive hostess. Still less is it necessary to describe what followed when, immediately on his arrival, he was ushered into Mrs. Cherryfield's morning-room, where a young, slim figure, pale indeed, but radiant with happiness and triumph, stood awaiting him. Those few brief moments of delight, when she once more felt Veryan's arms around her, more than outweighed the season of despairing misery through which Cynthia had passed, and went far towards consigning it to oblivion. The cloud had vanished, and sunshine swept across her life again. The nightmare had given place to a blissful and a beautiful awakening. She remembered no more her anguish, for joy that the man she loved was now hers and hers for ever.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CURTAIN FALLS.

FINISHING a story is rather like retiring from business. There are accounts to be wound up, claims to be satisfied, and a balance-sheet to be struck. And there is that feeling of mingled regret and relief which invariably attends the conclusion of any undertaking which has occupied our thoughts and energies for a certain period, be it weeks or years; the sense of occupation gone, and the apprehension of how much better we might have performed our task than appears from the result before us. But the pages are written, the transactions are finished, the accounts are closed; and it only remains for us now to add the few concluding words without which no story (barring those newfangled ones which, like Melchisedec, appear without beginning of years or end of days) can fairly be called complete.

The true inwardness of Veryan's history was speedily communicated to Virtue Sexton, who heard it with incredulity. It was only by dint of the most detailed repetition of the facts by Sir Thomas

Crotchett that the old woman at last allowed herself to be persuaded that for all those years she had been condemning the wrong man, and that her daughter had been the sinning one rather than the sinned against. The conviction came home to her mind all the more slowly and painfully in that it tended to discredit the divine origin of those strange dreams and mysterious premonitions in which she believed so implicitly, and this caused her almost unconsciously to review her whole system of religious ethics. Still, she had been right within limits. There had been a bitter trial in store for Cynthia, it was connected with a fair-haired man, and she had come through it scathless. The discovery that the fair-haired man was, after all, not the villain of the plot, reconciled her to the overthrow of some of her cherished theories, and she began to take Veryan into favour. And over and above all this she had fallen upon her own grandson in Hugh Crotchett, towards whom she had always felt that queer, unaccountable attraction. Hugh, we must in justice add, treated his grandmother very well. He allowed her to hover about and talk to him of Belinda when she was a girl—a fine, strapping, handsome girl she was, too—before she was thrown into temptation in that London bar-room; he did not object, either, to her personal attentions, for no one knew how to keep a room in order better than old Virtue; while he, on occasion, would clap his ancestress upon the

shoulder, and swear that when he had a crib of his own she should share it with him in the capacity of his housekeeper. As, however, Hugh was only nineteen or thereabouts, this benevolent and filial scheme did not take effect; indeed it was soon arranged that, when Veryan and Cynthia were tired of roaming about the world, Virtue should join their household and end her days with them.

The house-party dispersed a week after Veryan's return—a week that exceeded in gaiety the time that had gone before it. The Crotchetts went first, Sir Thomas having much learned business to attend to in connection with his favourite researches; then Dr. Tabernacle took flight, followed by Mrs. St. Paul, faint yet pursuing; while the Alabasters and Miss Walker departed last. Soon there was no one left but Veryan, and naturally he had some excuse for lingering.

It is unnecessary to say that a carefully expurgated version of the Belinda business had been communicated to Cynthia by Mrs. Cherryfield. She was told, as briefly as might be, that though Veryan had made a foolish and unlucky marriage when he was a boy there had been no issue, Hugh proving to be the son of a disreputable half-brother of Sir Thomas Crotchett, who had adopted him when a child. Cynthia was quite satisfied with this, and immensely relieved to find that she was not going to be Hugh's stepmother.

"But there is just one thing more I want to know," she said coaxingly one day when they were sitting in their favourite nook by the river side. "The initials on that stud were A. C. T. Now what does A stand for?"

"Little witch!" cried Veryan. "You'll suffer the fate of Bluebeard's wife some day if you're so curious. Why do you want to know?"

"How can I marry you if I don't know all your names?" said Cynthia. "What is it? Tell me, or I shall think it's something horrid."

"So it is," said Veryan. "Very horrid."

"But you've got to tell me, you know," persisted Cynthia.

"I've dropped it—I haven't used it for twelve years—I've never used it at all!" Veryan assured her in serio-comic despair.

"Then it must be awful," remarked Cynthia. "Yet A isn't a bad letter. There are some very pretty names beginning with A. Arthur, Alfred, Athelstan, Alured, Anthony—no, Anthony's horrid, and so's Andrew—oh, Carr, is it Andrew? Were you Andrew Thwaites?"

"No, no—something far worse than Andrew," replied Veryan, shaking his head.

"Then tell me," entreated Cynthia.

"Well, I will. Only you must promise never to repeat it," said Veryan, "for that name of mine constitutes my one weak point. It is my heel of

Achilles. It is the fly in my ointment. It is the skeleton in my cupboard. Look here, Cynthia. Did you ever hear of a mysterious people called the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel?"

"Of course," she answered; "I'm not a heathen."

"And did you ever hear of a strange little religious sect whose creed it is that we English people are those very Lost Ten Tribes?"

"I think so—yes; but I have never met any of them."

"Well, my father was one," continued Veryan. "The Identity, as they call it, was his one great article of faith; the beginning and the end, the sum and the substance, of his religion, and I believe he thought the entire universe had been created in order that the Ten Tribes might be lost and eventually turn up in England. When I was born, I was immediately recognised, of course, as a sort of Israelite, and my father thought he could not give me a more honourable or appropriate name than that of the man who took so very prominent a part in the separation under Rehoboam. And thus was I branded for life."

"A man who took a leading part?" echoed Cynthia. "What did he do?"

"Tore Jeroboam's new cloak into ribbons—among other things," said Veryan. "Rather an extravagant and destructive way of foretelling political changes, wasn't it? Fancy somebody tearing an Irish member's coat into tatters to assure him of the certainty of

Home Rule! I think the prophet would get the worst of it in that case."

"And what was the man's name? I can't remember it," said Cynthia.

Veryan whispered something.

Cynthia started. "Oh, you *poor* thing!" she cried with open eyes. "Why, your father must have been mad. Ahijah Thwaites—what a wicked shame! I don't wonder that you never liked him much. How did you ever bear it? However, you're Carr Veryan now, and that makes up for it. Did they call you Ahijah when you were little?"

"No," laughed Veryan, "my mother wouldn't have it. They called me Poppy, and it stuck to me till I was grown up."

Miss Jorkaway, poor baggage that she was, of course was soon got rid of. Mrs. Cherryfield repented of her determination to turn the mischief-maker out of doors next day, but took an early opportunity of telling her that as Cynthia was to be married shortly her services would be no longer needed. It was a bitter pill for her, for she had become greatly attached to Cherryfield Hall, and had enjoyed herself amazingly since her arrival. With fuller opportunities she felt that she could have done really well for herself, but her career had been cut short midway, and now she would have to look about in other directions. For the moment she could think of nothing but the collapse of all

her schemes. Sir Thomas Crotchett's revelations were not long in reaching her ears, and she was ready to tear her hair with vexation at the outcome of events. Was it possible, she asked herself, that she could have been so hoodwinked? Was it her fault that Veryan turned out respectable in spite of all the suspicious circumstances that had gathered round him? Ought not the Cherryfields to show their gratitude for all her zeal on their behalf, instead of sending her out into the world again? But no; gratitude was evidently not to be expected, and even Veryan, who (in her view) had almost laid himself open to an action for breach of promise, seemed to have no idea that he owed her any reparation. Ah, it was a queer world, and Miss Jorkaway departed with a pious wish upon her lips that the ungrateful family might never have cause to rue their treatment of the forlorn woman who had thrown herself so confidingly upon their care.

She left with a substantial sum in her pocket, and she did not go back to Pilton's Boarding-house. On the contrary, she sold out the stock she held in one of the Home Railways, and invested the proceeds in the lease of a desirable messuage at Notting Hill, which she furnished in accordance with her own tastes and adorned with an inviting legend, calculated to attract the passer-by. This legend was subsequently repeated and amplified in the form of an advertisement, a copy of which was transmitted in due course to the inmates of Cherry-

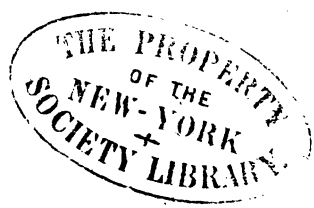
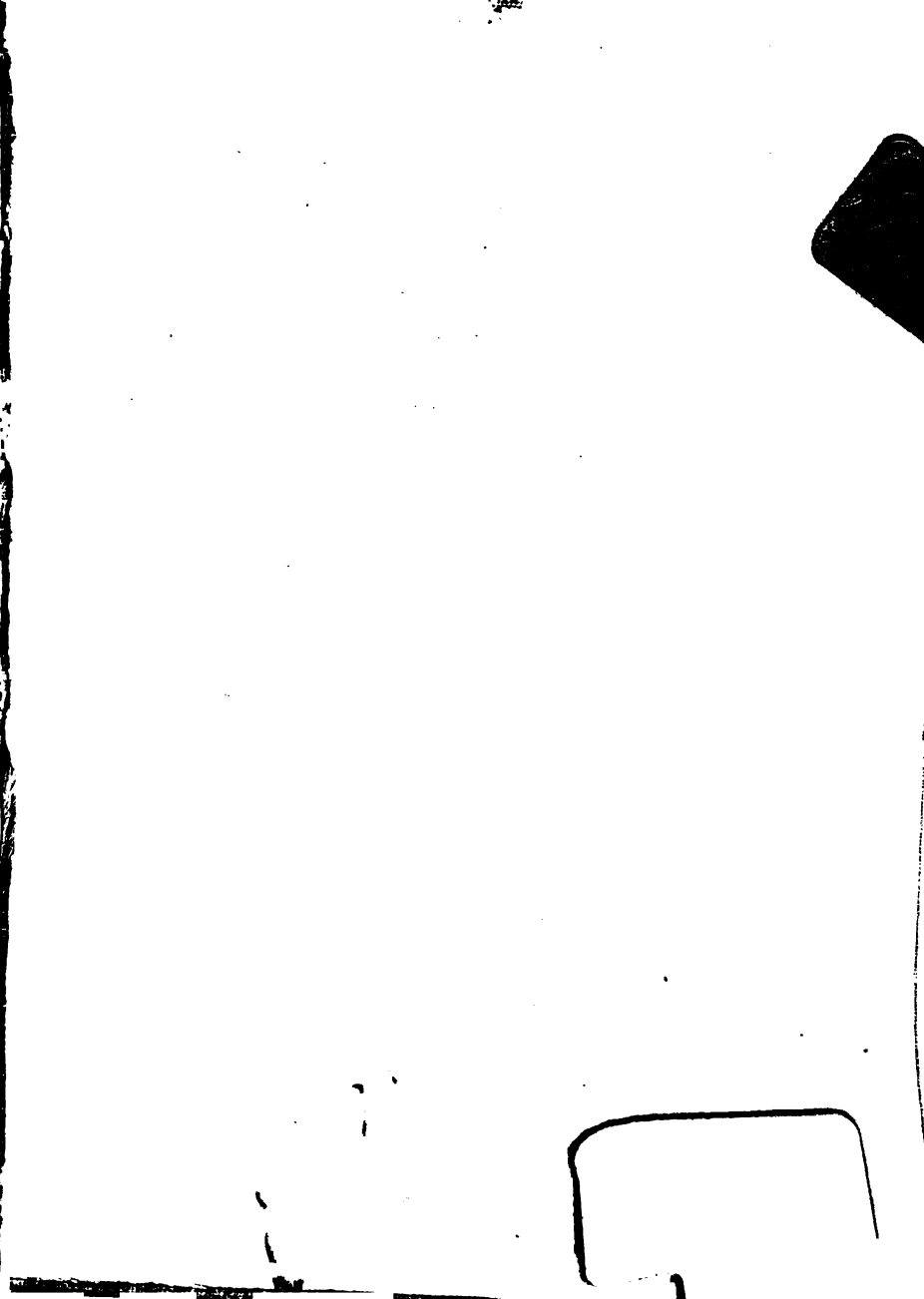
field Hall. And what could have been more insinuating?

MISS JORKAWAY'S SELECT BOARDING ESTABLISHMENT
FOR LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.

LATE DINNER. HOME COMFORTS. MUSIC.
CONVERSATION. GAMES.

TERMS MODERATE.

PATRONISED AND RECOMMENDED BY A COUNTY FAMILY.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